

ONLY THE RING FINGER KNOWS

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THE RING WILL CONFESS HIS LOVE

Volume 4

By
Satoru Kannagi
Hotaru Odagiri

celadonplum



Yaoi



Novel



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Wataru & Yuichi

The Ring Will Confer His Love

DRUGSROC

PROFILE

Satoru Kannagi

Born: March 26

Aries

Blood Type A

From Ibaraki Prefecture

Residing in Tokyo

I get a ton of letters saying that people are looking for a ring like the one in the book. There are even some brave souls who have them custom made! This fourth volume is supported by that kind of love from all of you.

COVER ART

Illustrator: Hotaru Odagiri

Born: October 5

Libra

Blood Type O

Residing in Tokyo

Manga artist, works include "Only The Ring Finger Knows," "Invisible Boy" (Tokuma Shoten), and others.

ONLY THE RING FINGER KNOWS

VOLUME FOUR
**THE RING WILL
CONFESS HIS LOVE**

Written by
SATORU KANNAGI

Illustrations by
HOTARU ODAGIRI

English translation by
Karen McGillicuddy



ONLY THE RING FINGER KNOWS VOL. 4 THE RING WILL CONFESS HIS LOVE

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Illustrated by Hotaru Odagiri

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The Ring Will Confess His Love

While studying late that night, there was a moment when Wataru recalled his boyfriend Yuichi's kiss. It wasn't a physical sensation or a thrill in his lips; it was the fleeting hesitation just before the touch, the warmth of a longing sigh washing over him.

"Is that good?"

Yuichi would look at Wataru as if he were begging for forgiveness, or he would gaze at Wataru flirtatiously, trying to seduce him. When he did that, his eyes always sent Wataru's mind spiraling, and he felt like his heart was being squeezed tightly.

Even when they were in high school, other schools had recognized Yuichi as the renowned "prince" for his elegant looks and style, which were like a model's. His intelligent eyes, which concealed a vague melancholy, were capable of dominating Wataru's heart with only a glance.

"You always stare at me so slack-jawed. Moron."

Wataru could even forgive Yuichi's abuse, which was so at odds with his kind exterior, because he knew it was something the boy gave to him alone. Wataru often got angry at the teasing, but so few people knew about this side of Yuichi, or that he was so dismissive of others.

"I love you, Wataru."

I love you, too, Wataru answered dreamily.

No matter what might happen, if Yuichi asked Wataru a million times, *Do you love me?* Wataru would say *yes* every time.

"I love you, too, Kazuki..."

Wataru's voice slipped unconsciously past his lips, bringing him back from his reverie with a jolt.

"Oh no! When did it get so late?"

His eyes flew to the hands of his clock, which told him that it was already three in the morning. I still haven't finished my work, Wataru moaned as he began to flip through his English workbook frantically.

After getting a C on the summer practice exams, he'd poured all his energy into a studying blitz for the last three months. Between his sensible boyfriend and the help of an excellent tutor, Wataru had somehow managed to stay within passing range. But it was only the beginning of December and still much too early to relax. Wataru refused to fail the college entrance exams and be forced to study for another year, so he had been cramming until dawn for the last several days, knowing that this was his moment of truth.

"Right! This year, I can't even think about Christmas or New Year's or anything fun like that!" he declared, his voice purposely loud to encourage himself in his solitude. His voice was so loud that he heard his little sister grumble in the room next to his, so he lowered his voice slightly and whispered once more to himself under his breath. "Wait for me, Kazuki. I'm going to pass, and then we can enjoy the spring together."

Wataru's desk was a jumble of study guides and

notebooks, his electronic dictionary on top of it all, but there was a space on top of it about the size of his palm that was empty except for one small item. Wataru looked down at the ring that seemed so out of place, resting in that empty spot. It had a simple design, just silver with a line of gold around the middle; it was something he could have bought anywhere. There were several faint scratches on it and at this point, no matter how much he polished it, it would never sparkle again. But ever since Wataru had first gotten it, he'd never let it out of his sight. He had carried it with him or worn it everywhere he went for almost a year and a half.

"It's like, after so much time and work, your importance still shines through," Wataru observed, nodding in satisfaction.

The ring was his most precious treasure. That was because another ring with the same design belonged to the person who was more precious to him than any other. Even Wataru had to smirk at how sentimental it was, but he couldn't treat something so full of memories as if it didn't matter, even to look tough.

"Huh?"

His phone was hooked to its charger, but the text message alert chimed suddenly. *Who could be calling at this hour?* he wondered, a little surprised, and he flipped his phone open eagerly.

Are you studying hard? It's going to get cold tonight, so don't fall asleep at your desk. I'm going to be up a little longer working on an essay, so if you have any questions, just call.

"Kazuki—"

The message was brusque, but Yuichi was always like that, so that didn't bother Wataru. Rather, he was frustrated that they were both awake this late, but so far apart. His boyfriend was awake right now and thinking of him. That small fact accented the misery of being unable to see each other.

"An essay, huh? I'm still hitting the books, never give up; and...there."

Thank you. Good luck to you, too.

Wataru filled his short response with these thoughts and pressed the "send" button. His boyfriend, Yuichi Kazuki, was one year older than Wataru and owned a mate to the ring Wataru had. They had been together a little over a year, through good times and bad, and although both of them were boys and misunderstandings never ceased to cause them problems, each time they overcame an obstacle, Wataru knew that their bond grew deeper and stronger.

He knew that, and he was sure that Yuichi felt the same. Wataru almost felt relaxed when he heard Yuichi's placid voice on the phone or heard Yuichi's cruel rejoinders to his jokes. At the present moment, Wataru had less than a month and a half left before his exam in February, so the time he and Yuichi could spend together had diminished even further. But despite the loneliness, there was none of the doubt he had felt at the very beginning of their relationship.

And Kazuki splits his time between his part-time job and his school club, so he still has it as hard as ever.

They managed their time carefully and had

promised to get together two nights from then. Yuichi worked the morning shift as a waiter in a café, so Wataru had started looking forward to the fleeting rendezvous they had when he waited for Yuichi on his way home from prep classes. Yuichi had dutifully kept his old promise to work around Wataru's schedule to the best of his ability, and had done everything possible to fulfill his promise.

All right. Wataru switched gears, motivating himself once more.

If they could get through the next month and a half, everything would be fine. At least, that was what Wataru believed.

"I thought I told you not to come."

As soon as Yuichi opened the door, he made a frightfully angry face. He had wrapped a cardigan over his pajamas.

"This is a critical time for you!" Yuichi went on. "Come on, go home. Just go."

"H-hey, wait a second. There's no need for that!" Wataru said.

As Yuichi started to close the door on him, Wataru pushed against it with both hands, fighting back frantically. Yuichi stopped, seemingly taken aback by how serious Wataru was acting. He gave a theatrical sigh and glowered at Wataru, his eyes shot through with fever.

"Sorry, I didn't go to work today. I'll call you later."

Yuichi had sent that message to Wataru late in the afternoon of the day they'd promised to meet. If he had to cancel their date, so be it, but the fact that he'd missed work as well had worried Wataru. When Yuichi started college, he had taken the opportunity to move out of his parents' house, so he was living alone. The allowance his parents sent him was the bare minimum he needed, so he worked part-time to make up the difference and managed to scrape by.

Whatever else he may be, this guy is pretty serious.

Wataru didn't think a guy with such a strong sense of responsibility would take off work for nothing. Given that it was December, he imagined that Yuichi was in bed with a cold.

"Wataru, please consider your situation. Do you want me to die of a guilty conscience?"

"Don't exaggerate. I'll be fine. I brought a mask. See?"

"I'd rather you didn't come at all if you're going to be weird."

Just as Wataru had suspected, Yuichi had gotten a fever the night before and had been in bed. Yuichi gazed suspiciously at Wataru, who stood in the doorway with a mask on his face. Wataru knew that even if he asked, Yuichi wouldn't be honest and tell him he was sick, so he had forced himself into the apartment without warning and now Yuichi was mad at him. He could understand Yuichi's concern about not infecting someone studying for exams, but he didn't have to be so cold. Wataru was a little hurt.

"I swear, I'll go right home," Wataru said.

Wataru's dejected expression won Yuichi over, and he finally surrendered. He gruffly told Wataru to come in and then immediately sat back down on his bed. Wataru went to the kitchen immediately and set out the apples he'd brought for the patient, then followed Yuichi into the bedroom. The heater worked pretty well in the studio apartment and the low sound of a humidifier punctuated an uncomfortable silence.

"So...come on, you live alone, right?" Wataru asked.

"So?" Yuichi asked, glancing at Wataru coldly.

"So, of course I'm worried if I think you're sick," Wataru said with a sigh of exasperation. "If you get worse, there's no one to take care of you. What would you do for food or medicine?"

"I'm not a child."

"I-I know that! I guess I'll just go home! I was just...worried about you."

As Wataru was making this excuse, unreasonable feelings began to fill his heart bit by bit. *Just a little bit longer.* Yuichi had said that every day to encourage him, and so Wataru had worked hard, but he detested his position as a student studying for exams. It was horrible not being able to see each other, but even when he came to visit when Yuichi was sick, Yuichi made a fuss. Logically, Wataru understood that was just Yuichi being considerate, but his heart was still filled with hunger.

"Hey, I—I brought you apples. And I'll put some sports drinks in the fridge for you."

Yuichi remained silent.

"If you get really worn out, you can call me whenever. I mean it. See? I'm leaving now."

Wataru turned his back to cut off any desire to linger and worked to make his voice sound cheerful. If he lingered, Yuichi would never get to rest. Wataru started to walk out of the room, but that was when Yuichi spoke.

"You better take something when you get home."

"W-what?"

"That's an order."

Yuichi stood up and swiftly hugged Wataru from behind. He let out a reluctant sigh that slipped down the back of Wataru's neck, just ahead of the whispering breath against his ear, the same one that always spoke his name.

"Wataru..."

"Ah—"

Wataru caught his breath at the ticklish sensation. What could he do but give into this guy and his personality that never fell into line until the last second? He'd talked big about giving orders and then despite that, he folded Wataru up in gentle arms, becoming a whole other person than the Yuichi Kazuki everyone knew. Wataru rested both hands on the fevered arms that crossed over his chest and smirked to himself, not letting it show.

"Hey, you remember how I was in bed with a cold right after you finished your exams, Kazuki?"

"Yeah. I remember."

Yuichi had always remembered it just fine, but his voice made it sound like Wataru had just reminded him.

His act was transparent because Wataru knew it so well, but it drove him closer to the edge. He kept his face as empty of reaction as he could.

"When you came that time, you bragged to me about how you could peel an entire apple in one strip without breaking the skin. Here's a perfect opportunity. Maybe I'll give it a try, too, before I go home."

"It sounds easy, but it takes a lot of technique. You're too short-tempered. You'll never be able to do it."

"I don't mind," Wataru said as he looked over his shoulder at Yuichi's face and smiled competitively. "The more I fail, the more time we get to spend together."

"I can't believe you. You're studying for exams. You can't be this laid back."

"Trying to keep me down isn't gonna get you very far."

Wataru was frustrated that he couldn't kiss Yuichi. So instead, Wataru slowly looked away and, rather than press his lips against Yuichi's, he hooked his ring finger with Yuichi's ring finger.

"You're wearing your ring, too," Wataru said.

"Yeah. I had a feeling you would come. And I want it to remember all the time I spend with you."

"Didn't you try to throw me out a second ago?" Wataru griped, half in shock, but Yuichi was smiling impudently. His cold attitude was surprising, considering he'd expected Wataru to come all along. Given the situation, Wataru could put a positive spin on it and say that maybe Yuichi couldn't just welcome him in easily; but on the other hand, he couldn't quite cast aside the

suspicion that Yuichi just wanted to tease him.

"What do you mean, you want the ring to remember everything?" Wataru asked.

"You really want to know?"

Yuichi pressed his face closer to Wataru's hair, which smelled of sunshine, and he smiled with pleasure. His body was feverish, but he began to speak more cheerfully than before.

"These rings aren't a symbol of love for us so much as they're a symbol of our history. If we ever split up, these rings will have seen everything we did together. I think that'll overcome the distance and bind us together."

"Kazuki—"

Wataru was confused by what Yuichi was telling him. He seemed to be implying that in the near future they would be going their separate ways. As if he'd noticed Wataru's reproachful eyes telling him not to jinx them, Yuichi kissed Wataru's hair to reassure him.

"There's nothing going on, don't worry. I just meant that's why I want to make as much time for you as possible. The more time we make for ourselves, the deeper our relationship can grow. Right?"

"We have to...make time together?"

"Yeah. Before I met you, I might have mocked a man for wearing this one ring. But now I don't care about that kind of prejudice. As long as something is important to me, it doesn't matter what it is. I love this ring that ties us together."

A flood of happiness washed pleasantly over Wataru's ears, and he began to smile. Their rings

glimmered faintly between their locked fingers, emphasizing Yuichi's words. Wataru didn't want to think about breaking up with Yuichi. But they were linked by the feelings infused in the rings, not bound by the rings itself. When he thought of it like that, he felt like even the idea of being alone wouldn't frighten him.

He wished Yuichi could hold him forever, but he couldn't force a sick man to stay on his feet. Wataru gently freed himself from Yuichi's arms and decided to attempt the apple-peeling right away. First he sent Yuichi off to bed, and then he brought the apples and a knife from the kitchen. He picked the small coffee table for his work and decided to move it to Yuichi's bedside.

"Kazuki, do you mind if I move the books and papers on your table?"

"Do whatever you want," Yuichi answered sluggishly, his eyes closed as he lay in bed. He must have been getting tired after all. Careful not to make too much noise, Wataru picked up several hardcover books from Europe.

Oh no! Was there something inside the books?

Wataru took a step forward, when suddenly, a card fell at his feet. He quickly bent to pick it up, but his eyes caught sight of loopy handwriting and his hand stopped.

Um... what if I'm not supposed to see this?

The unfamiliar stamp was from a foreign country, and the cracked postmark said "NY." His heart rang loudly in his ears and Wataru instinctively warned himself back. Even if they were lovers, he couldn't look at a postcard that was addressed to Yuichi. But now that

he'd seen it, it was hard to ignore.

After some hesitation, he decided to just look at the front of the card, and he flipped it over. It had a feathery watercolor illustration of a little girl hugging a comical-looking doll under a Christmas tree.

What's this? It must be a Christmas card...

He didn't see a return address, but he certain it was from a girl. The picture was too cute for a guy to pick out and the pretty handwriting he'd seen before made it even more likely.

"Wataru? What are you doing in there?" Yuichi called out, wondering why Wataru had stopped moving. Wataru slipped the card back into the right book and put a smile on his face before turning around.

"Sorry. I was just thinking these books look hard."

"You're so weird. Who cares about that right now?"

Normally Yuichi would have questioned him more intently, but his fever must have worn him out because he relaxed and closed his eyes again immediately. The vigor with which Yuichi had tried to chase Wataru away when he came over had fooled Wataru, but Yuichi must have been in pretty bad shape.

He's been really sick. He had no chance of convincing me to go home.

Wataru wished that Yuichi hadn't gone to such trouble to put on a brave face. He felt sorry for him.

I'm a little worried about the card, but it's more important to me that Yuichi get better. I won't get any funny ideas. I won't, I won't. Though I've never heard

about a friend of his being in New York...

If there was someone Yuichi found fulfillment in, Wataru was sure the day would come when he would introduce them. Wataru stamped out his faint doubts with this thought.

"I'll get a wet towel for you. You should cool your face off," Wataru said. "And I'll start some rice porridge, too. You need to eat something, so have some after I leave."

"Rice porridge? You know how to make that?"

"Don't be mean! All you have to do is push a button on the rice cooker. It's fine. Just be still. I won't stay long, and then I'll go straight home, so don't worry."

Wataru's heart ached slightly at Yuichi's disappointing obedience. It was so rare for Yuichi to not try to hide his weakness from Wataru. He was frighteningly stubborn and prideful, and Wataru thought Yuichi wouldn't want him to see anything disgraceful in him. Yuichi had never acted this passively before.

"Are you all right, Kazuki?"

Wataru had stayed there overnight several times, so he knew exactly where the towels were kept. He was placing a moistened hand towel on Yuichi's forehead when Yuichi grabbed his hand, catching him off guard.

"What is it? Did that hurt?"

"Your hand is so cool—It feels good."

"This is no time to be joking around! You should go to a clinic and get some medicine, or—"

"I took some over-the-counter stuff before you came. It's fine; I'm really not sick enough to make such

a fuss over. Just go home while I'm still awake."

Wataru was about to protest Yuichi harping on that again, but he picked up on Yuichi's real feelings and closed his mouth. If Wataru left after he went to sleep, it would be that much lonelier for Yuichi when he woke up alone.

Smiling, Yuichi had once told him, "I want to have a place where I can satisfy you after you finish your exams." So he was spending out of his savings to live alone.

Thanks to that, we can be together like this without worrying about what anyone thinks.

Still, it was difficult for Wataru to have to leave Yuichi when he seemed so exhausted.

But we only need to be patient a little longer. Once I get into college, I can be with Kazuki all the time. I'll have more chances to see sides of him I've never seen, and I know I'll only love him more.

Once Wataru started college, they would live together. That was the promise they had made. He had begged his little sister Karin's support with that goal in mind, and while he studied for his exams, she worked on getting their parents' approval. Wataru was a little worried that Karin would be lonely when he moved out, since their parents both worked and were often gone even on the weekends, but while going to school she was also working hard to save up money, so that wouldn't be a problem.

"I'll start the rice porridge and then go. We'll save the apples for next time."

"All right. Thanks," Yuichi said, and smiled faintly

as he squeezed Wataru's hand.

Wataru wished he could continue feeling the tender touch of Kazuki's hand, since it was so natural when they were near each other. As he uttered this small wish, he was almost embarrassed by how his feelings for Yuichi swelled up inside him.

There was no Christmas for the serious student, but Wataru had already prepared himself for it. The year before, Yuichi had been studying for his exams, so Wataru had been forced to miss out on holiday events with him for two years in a row. But he didn't even have the time to regret it. His studies were drawing to a close at last, and it was simply impossible to spend time with his boyfriend.

I've gotten a lot more confident, but I'm still not totally set.

Wataru wanted to get into the department of engineering at M University, and its exam was on the fourth of February. He was taking exams at several other schools as backup, but he really wanted to go there, so he wasn't placing as much importance on the other schools' exam dates. At his prep school, he had heard lectures by a professor who taught at M University and been so impressed that he wanted to take the man's classes. When he told Yuichi that, Yuichi had supported him, laughing, "That's the kind of thing that motivates people."

I didn't do Christmas Eve with him, so I ought to do New Year's...I should go and pray for good luck passing my exam, anyway. If I go straight there and then

come straight back, that should be fine.

Wataru smirked to himself as he changed, wondering who he was making excuses for. It was New Year's Eve and Wataru had his first date in a long time with Yuichi. They were going to visit a temple together for the first prayer of the year. It had been two weeks since he had gone to visit the sick Yuichi. Wataru had decided to allow himself to celebrate, though it was hardly appropriate behavior for a student cramming for exams.

"Huh? You've got your coat on—Are you going somewhere, Wataru?"

When Wataru came down from his room, sharp-eyed Karin caught sight of him while she was preparing the New Year's noodles with their mother. There were only two hours left until the New Year, and they could hear the boisterous voices of the TV entertainers chatting with more anticipation than usual in the living room where their father was watching TV.

"Oh, did you make *plans* to visit a temple? You did that last year, too, right?"

"Sh-shut up! I need to beg the gods for help right now!"

Karin knew about his relationship with Yuichi, so when she teased him it made him very uncomfortable. He wanted to hurry up and end the conversation, so he told his parents he was going out. They let him go without any problem, probably thinking about how sons always try to flee the nest.

"Wow, it's cold!"

The chilly night air closed around Wataru and

his breath melted into the darkness in a trail of white puffs. Yuichi had gone back to his parents' house the day before, so they were going to meet at the local train station. Wataru's heart was bounding as if they had gone back to the beginning of their relationship, but they were only planning to get some tea after visiting the temple, then split up and go back home quickly. It had been obvious to both of them that once Wataru saw Yuichi's face, it would be hard for him to leave again, but Yuichi would never have agreed to even go with him to the temple without this arrangement, so Wataru had to be strong.

He keeps holding me off...I can't wait for it to be spring already.

He pulled his scarf up over his mouth and nose and scrunched his face up in the biting cold, hurrying to where Yuichi waited. They were going to the same temple as the year before, a shrine famous for its guardian spirit of scholarship. Yuichi had gotten into T University after buying a charm there, so Wataru was hoping for the same luck.

And here's a red light. Man that was close! I almost kept going.

Wataru came to a sudden stop and turned to look helplessly at the people hanging out in front of the station. He thought Yuichi would already be there, but it was nighttime after all, and in the seething crowds it was hard to tell people apart. *Only natural, I guess*, he thought and relaxed, but in the very next moment he caught sight of a young man. His revitalizing presence forced an unconscious gasp of emotion from Wataru.

Whenever I see him on the street... I still...

His best friend, Tomoaki Kawamura, would have laughed at Wataru and said he was “stupid in love,” but still he was taken captive by his boyfriend’s face. And he knew for certain that he wasn’t blinded by love: girls dressed in all their holiday best were staring at Yuichi passionately, and passersby were caught by surprise and turned for a second look. This was the sort of scene that made Wataru say “Long live the prince” to tease him.

I don't think he even sees me.

Wataru briefly considered waving at him. But Yuichi seemed to be checking his messages on his cell phone and kept his head down, never looking up.

Well, that's unusual. I've never seen him so focused on his phone before.

Yuichi used his cell phone to the fullest in his relationship with Wataru, but he didn’t actually like them very much. He was often the object of everyone’s attention, and so he didn’t seem to like the feeling that people could get hold of him wherever he went. As his boyfriend, Wataru understood better than anyone how popular Yuichi was, so he couldn’t help sympathizing with such a reasonable opinion.

Still, I wonder what he's looking at. It doesn't look like he's sending a message.

Yuichi was far away, so Wataru couldn’t tell exactly, but Yuichi seemed to be staring at the phone’s screen. His grim expression made Wataru feel more and more uncomfortable as he watched him.

My heart's fluttering so strangely...

Wataru ceased to notice the frozen wind on his

cheek and the chirping of the green traffic light. He felt as if he and Yuichi were the only things left in the world. But Yuichi never raised his eyes and didn't seem to realize that Wataru was coming, despite how close he was. Wataru was conscious only of Yuichi, but Yuichi's attention was monopolized by something else.

"If we ever split up for whatever reason..."

His words from the other day sprang up again in Wataru's mind. He'd quickly assured Wataru that it would never happen, but Wataru still couldn't rest easy. Yuichi was only looking at his cell phone, Wataru thought, trying to laugh at his own cowardice, when cheerful voices brought him back to reality.

"The light's green! Go! Go!"

"Ahh! It's changing!"

Several gorgeously-dressed girls flapped past Wataru, who was frozen in place. He numbly watched them go, his eye transfixed by the skirt that fluttered under the hem of one of the girls' coats.

A girl in a dress holding a comical doll under a Christmas tree...

Wataru recalled the picture on the Christmas card automatically.

Yuichi had gotten better soon after that, but Wataru had been unable to bring up the subject of the card and he had locked it away in his heart, telling himself that it was nothing important. But from time to time, the memory of its existence resurfaced to torment him. At loose ends, he had described the picture to Karin and asked if she knew what it was. She had guessed from the tree and the doll that it might be *The Nutcracker*.

Maybe I'm just being too sensitive. It must be built-up stress from my exams.

Yuichi staring at his cell phone, and a *Nutcracker* Christmas card. Why did these two seemingly independent things make Wataru's heart pound so hard?

"Oh—"

Somebody bumped into his shoulder and Wataru came back to his senses. He was about to hurry across the road, but the light had already turned red again. On the other side of the road, Yuichi had finally noticed him. His arms were folded and he looked surprised.

I really must be tired...

Wataru was spending an unprecedented amount of time buried in his books, so of course meaningless things were going to keep bothering him. A feeble, exasperated smile floated over his lips. A second later, the cell phone in his pocket started to ring.

"What're you doing?" Yuichi was upset with him, like always. "You might get hit by a car daydreaming like that. I'm not kidding."

"You're one to talk. You didn't even see me."

"What?"

"I don't know what was so fascinating, but I've been here a while," Wataru shot back in annoyance. Yuichi would usually have had a mean retort, but now he was momentarily lost for words. That brief silence was strangely meaningful and Wataru felt even more uncomfortable. They were going to visit a temple together, but if they were angry, the spirits would be uncomfortable, too.

What is with him? Geez.

Keeping his ear to the phone, he stole a look at Yuichi. Yuichi was speaking in a much gentler tone, as if smoothing over the blunder of hesitating. "Well, just make sure you cross when it turns green this time."

"I know that; I'm already on the crosswalk. I'm hanging up now."

Wataru hung up curtly and strode across the road, a little angry. But even so, he knew that as soon as he saw Yuichi in front of him, he wouldn't be able to maintain his anger for long. It was annoying, but he loved everything about Yuichi. And when Yuichi looked straight at him, his eyes full of adoration, Wataru could forgive him for anything. Even if Yuichi called him stupid or said he was a lost cause, Wataru had it so bad that even *that* would ring sweetly in his ears.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Kazuki."

See? he smiled wryly, surprised at himself. In the time it had taken to cross the road, their minor spat had already been forgotten.

"Geez, this is even more crowded than last year," Wataru said.

"Don't wander off, Wataru."

There was only an hour left before the New Year and the temple yard was overflowing with people who had climbed its long stairway. Wataru had memories of being disgusted by the crowds the year before, but he felt that the chaos was even worse this year. Maybe that was because he was so stressed out.

"It's still a little early to line up for the temple visit after all. Let's kill some time looking at the vendors. I only had some New Year's noodles to eat tonight."

"Me, too!"

"Okay. You're starving to death, then."

Wataru's face must have been more miserable than he realized, because Yuichi had picked up on it before Wataru could even say anything. Yuichi was fighting back laughter as he guessed right, so all Wataru could do was cover with a laugh of his own.

Vendors' stalls stretched several hundred feet along both sides of the temple's pathway. All of them were brightly lit and doing brisk business, calling in new customers with an energy that kept the cold at bay. There was the rich smell of yakisoba sauce searing, of shish kabobs and Korean pancakes and other exotic foods. People packed every one of the stalls, and festive conversation filled the area. The stone path split to the left and right in front of the temple entrance, and along those routes the stalls were so numerous it made Wataru's eyes boggle.

"What are you doing, Wataru? Do you want to eat something?"

"Yeah, but now that I see everything, it all looks so good...Oh, what's that?"

They turned to the right, choosing the path with the fewest people. A little further up, Wataru spotted a peculiar shop. A mid-sized van was parked as if at a flea market, with several sets of patio furniture set in front of it. An ancient stove was also set out to provide heat. The seats were mostly filled with young couples and groups, and the area floated brightly up out of the chaos to offer a nice respite.

"It looks like a restaurant took a vacation here," Wataru said.

"Maybe it's all right at a flea market or a fair, but it's not exactly appealing in a place like this," Yuichi murmured, intrigued, and started walking forward curiously. But after only a few steps, he turned coolly and called to Wataru, who was walking slowly, "What're you doing? I told you not to get separated from me."

"Well, it's not like I'm trying to! There are just so many people, I—ah!"

"Hey—"

Just then, a wave of people pushed between the two of them and Wataru almost lost sight of Yuichi. He was being pushed from behind as well and lost his balance. He struggled to right himself, but before he could fall, a hand shot out to him. Yuichi quickly caught Wataru's arms and hauled him back up powerfully. The force of it made him start to fall forward this time and he wound up falling against Yuichi's chest.

"Are you all right? Don't space out like that—it's dangerous," Yuichi scolded.

"Uh...I was...I'm sorry."

Wataru had never imagined the day might come that Yuichi would embrace him so openly in a crowd of onlookers. Wataru was flustered and his entire body was soon flushed. Yuichi didn't seem aware of it, but just the fact that he was still touching him made Wataru's heart gallop. Plus, the last few months had been oppressively Kazuki-deficient, so it was that much harder for him to calm back down.

"Um, K-Kazuki...we should go..."

"It's fine. No one's looking."

"That's impossible! People always notice you."

"This isn't exactly hot and heavy. All I did was catch my friend who tripped. Besides, it's obviously impossible to walk without touching anyone in this crowd. If you act normal, it won't look strange."

"Y-you think so?"

Somehow outmaneuvered, Wataru took a few wobbling steps, still pressed against Yuichi. If he didn't pay attention to the rest, he couldn't deny that this was an opportunity to briefly experience what it felt like to be lovers. He steeled himself and was struggling to quiet the beating of his heart when suddenly Yuichi nonchalantly took hold of his hand.

"W-what are you doing, Kazuki?"

"Just for a while."

Yuichi affected bravado, his face turned far away. Apparently everything in Wataru's heart was open to him. Wataru sighed in defeat, but he didn't fail to notice that the hand he held was as warm as his own. Wataru finally smiled.

"It looks a lot like Western food, huh?"

They finally made it out of the crowd and, standing in front of the vendor's stall, Yuichi gently let go of Wataru's hand. The movement was so natural that Wataru was able to adjust his feelings effortlessly.

"Yeah, it does. I've seen these outlet-type restaurant places on TV before, but they can't have a very big menu if they're this small. And what is it doing here at—"

"Well, if it isn't Wataru and Kazuki!"

"Huh?"

"It's been a while. What's up, you two?"

Wataru didn't even need to turn and see who the voice belonged to; he could guess who it was from Yuichi's expression. It had changed completely from the softness of a moment before; his eyes were filled with caution now. As far as Wataru knew, there was only one person besides his older brother Shohei who could make Yuichi look like that.

"Asaka."

"You guys are spending New Year's Eve together? I wasn't expecting to run into you in a place like this."

Masanobu Asaka appeared with a smile from the other end of the van that had been converted into a simple kitchen. He was two years ahead of Yuichi in school and the head of the Renovation Research Society at the university. The group studied recycling buildings in the field with members. Yuichi was thinking about working in architecture in the future, so after repeated invitations he had just joined the club a little while ago.

But even though that was all the relationship they had, there was little reason for Yuichi to be so guarded.

Why.... why did we have to run into Asaka, of all people?

Compared to Masanobu, who had a pleasant smile on his face, Yuichi's expression was openly nasty. His nature was not the sort that let him easily put on a neutral mask in any situation, but in this case it was the other person's fault. The fact was that as far as Wataru was concerned, the two of them were more than simply classmates. They had quite a complicated relationship.

"How've you been, Wataru?"

"Fine, um...Good to see you."

Casually ignoring Yuichi's piercing gaze, Masanobu came up next to them, talking cheerfully. Wataru had been captivated by Yuichi, when he was standing in front of the station earlier, but Masanobu, with his gracious presence and his fine-featured good looks, was strong competition for Yuichi's charm. He wore a knee-length cashmere coat nonchalantly and though he was standing there naturally, no one could have torn their eyes away from him. Wataru was no exception, and Masanobu began talking to him affably as if he could read these thoughts in his eyes.

"Have we really not seen each other since the Ryokuyo High School culture festival? I wrote you a message to ask how things were going, but for someone who said he's getting whipped by studying, you seem pretty upbeat. I'm glad. It puts my mind at ease."

"Oh, uh—"

"Wataru."

Wataru was unexpectedly stuck for an answer, so Yuichi urged him on. "Go ahead and answer him." Yuichi must have sensed a challenge from Masanobu since he had brazenly ignored Yuichi to talk to Wataru. Masanobu had indirectly informed Yuichi that Wataru hadn't run into him in a long time, but he had sent him an e-mail to tell him how things were going. That consideration was probably only meant to humiliate Yuichi because Wataru had been "fraternizing with the enemy."

He is so competitive...

Feeling conflicted, Wataru sighed and stole a glance at Yuichi's harsh profile.

Since Masanobu had confessed to having feelings



for him, and had even stolen a kiss from him once, Wataru didn't want to do anything to provoke Yuichi's jealousy. To be honest, he would rather leave than stand around talking. But if Wataru was too considerate of Masanobu, it would hurt Yuichi's pride.

This sucks. We're here to visit the temple. I don't want to cause trouble, but Asaka hasn't done anything wrong. As long as I put up a boundary in my heart, then what's the harm?

Wataru's heart belonged to Yuichi and nothing would change that. He had explained that to Masanobu, and he was sure Masanobu had accepted it. But still Wataru dwelt on how sorry he felt, since Masanobu still treated him with unwavering kindness.

"Um, you look like you're doing well, too, Asaka."

"Thank you."

Masanobu saw the hardness finally leave Wataru's face and relief flashed through his eyes. He was intelligent and placid, and it could be dangerous to let him see naked emotions, so Wataru was relieved. Masanobu may have seemed nonchalant, but he had no doubt struggled internally before calling out to them. He must have known that it would be awkward, since Wataru was with Yuichi.

"Umm...oh, yeah. You mentioned in your e-mail that you've been offered a job at Shohei's design company. It's a little late, but congratulations."

"Thanks. I was actually planning to tell you more about it after your exams. When Shohei made me the offer, I couldn't believe he was serious. I was shocked, too."

"What? He made you the offer?"

"That's right," Masanobu answered. Shohei had created an alliance called "Sette d'Oro" with top-tier architect friends, a group of rising stars garnering attention from around the world. There was no end to the people hoping to join the firm, but Yuichi had said that Shohei was turning people away in droves. The fact that Masanobu was scouted by a company like that told Wataru how brilliant he was.

"I did an internship there. It was more like an extension of that."

"I'm sure it wasn't like that. I mean, Shohei decided to hire you, right? I don't think he cuts corners with his work like that. Isn't that right, Kazuki?"

"I guess," Yuichi agreed hesitantly, clipping his words. Shohei was the sort of person who often belittled others, and he was an outrageous tyrant who made much harsher demands on others than most people did. Since Wataru was going out with Yuichi, he had at times been the target of Shohei's malice, but his blunt and cutting attacks came with a cheerful smile, so he was not to be underestimated.

"My brother got you good," Yuichi said, his bold statement making Masanobu turn his eyes from Wataru.

"I'm sorry, what do you mean by that?"

"Don't play dumb. He got the name 'Sette d'Oro' from a movie, and just like it says, it's a group of seven people who sell as a unit. If they add one more, they'd have to change the name. My brother is the kind of guy who really gets wrapped up in stuff like that. But if he scouted you out, it's because he wants you to be his pawn."

After Yuichi had let fly this degrading observation, a bold smile broke over his lips as he regained his spirit.

"It's unbelievable. What are you two planning this time?" Yuichi finished.

"That's not very nice. Maybe Shohei *is* opposed to your relationship with Wataru, but that has nothing to do with my job. Don't forget, that man does not let emotion interfere with his business. Sure, he decides whether or not to accept a job order based on his own preferences, but there's no way to avoid that. In the architecture world, he's the sort of person who either gets called a genius or an eccentric. He's allowed to have whims."

"He's never done anything he didn't want to do."

"Yeah. Though inside, he does seem a bit concerned about the fact that his nice little brother has such a frown on his face."

Masanobu refused to back down either, and he parried with a smile. At first glance it might have seemed like two handsome young men were chatting amiably, but Wataru could feel the sparks flying between them.

"Um...anyway, we can all agree it's pretty incredible! He helped you with your studies and did a lot to mentor you. You should do something to celebrate," Wataru said.

"Then when you pass your exams, we can celebrate that, too," Masanobu said.

Wataru had cut in to try to salvage the scene, but Masanobu threw an answer deep with implication back at him without missing a beat. Wataru was confounded by the suddenness of it, so Masanobu changed his tack at

once and chuckled, "It was only a joke. I really do want to celebrate, but it looks like Kazuki would kill me if I took advantage of that excuse."

"What excuse?"

"The excuse to invite you out. Look, he's glaring at me. I said it was just a joke."

"Asaka—" Wataru said.

Wataru didn't know how he should respond to Masanobu, who was smirking in exasperation, so he looked to Yuichi for help. He wasn't so upset that Wataru had to worry about him, but the gaze he'd turned on Masanobu had not relaxed even a fraction. He looked ready to attack Masanobu for jumping on every opportunity that presented itself.

"Um, Asaka—please don't talk like that," Wataru pleaded gently, utterly flustered. He could tell that both Yuichi and Masanobu were surprised by these unexpected words. "I'm grateful to you, Asaka. And Kazuki understands that. Like we said before, you and I spend time together in a different way."

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm still just a kid, so I'm not sure I can get away with being that selfish. But if you make suggestive comments like that, then I really do need to keep my distance. I can't put myself ahead of Kazuki and make him feel bad."

"You talk too much."

Yuichi interrupted Wataru curtly, as if to keep him from saying more. He probably didn't want to be the reason Wataru was estranged from Masanobu, either. Wataru closed his mouth in resignation and sighed

inwardly. Masanobu looked from one to the other of them, as if he had been caught off-guard.

But how else can I put it? I have no idea what I should do.

Wataru's heart was so filled with confusion that he let out a bewildered sigh. He hadn't meant to act be so indecisive. He had already clearly indicated his feelings, but maybe that wasn't enough. If he couldn't conduct himself smoothly, his unstable relationship with Yuichi would fail one day.

Maybe I really shouldn't see Asaka anymore. That's probably the best...

As Wataru brooded over this idea feebly, a smile came over Masanobu's face.

"You're right. Sorry," Masanobu said. "I was breaking my own rules. When I want to see you, I'll be honest and say so. Of course, it's okay if you refuse."

"Asaka..."

"I wouldn't like it if we couldn't see each other anymore," Masanobu continued. "I'd like to see you, *whatever way I can.*"

Wataru was able to add a word of truth and loyalty to what he had said. Yuichi could say nothing against it, and he wore a complex expression in his silence.

When did he...? Wataru thought.

When Wataru saw Masanobu and spoke about his feelings, there had always been sadness in Masanobu's eyes. His face was filled with a sweet loneliness that had connected with the weakness in Wataru. Because of that, he could never turn Masanobu down completely.

Wataru didn't sense any of that sadness as

Masanobu said "I'd like to see you," even though he was looking Wataru right in the eyes. The smile he wore was gentle and even soothed Wataru's heart. The energy in his face hid a shadow, but the impression he gave off seemed slightly different, now that he had cast off all performance.

Asaka looks even cooler than usual.

It was no doubt because Masanobu had begun to look toward the future, freed of the wound that enslaved him. Loving Wataru had opened a new door for him, and his expression contained even more depth and power, revealing the peculiar power of the child's audacity hidden in the adult's intelligence.

"What are you doing, Masanobu?"

Their silence was suddenly shattered by an unfamiliar voice. The brash voice jerked Wataru and the others back to reality from their dip into sentimentality.

"He's not coming back no matter how long you wait for him. You gonna ring in the new year with your little brother or what?"

"Masa'aki—"

The young man named Masa'aki approached them boldly, carrying a plastic takeout bag in his right hand. He looked about the same age as Wataru, but he was much taller than him. Even if he didn't approach the height of Yuichi or Masanobu, he looked like he was almost six feet tall.

"Who're these guys?" Masa'aki asked his older brother, shooting them suspicious glances. His good looks and slim physique were like Masanobu's, but he had a more untamed look than honor student Masanobu.

Wataru glimpsed something ferocious in his expression and the glinting of his eyes.

"What've you been talking about while you made me go shopping?"

"Sorry, Masa'aki. I'll make it up to you later, so just be nice and say hello. I told you about these guys already. This is Kazuki, an underclassman at my school, and this is Fujii, who I tutored over the summer."

"Fujii...you mean—? You're Wataru Fujii?"

Masa'aki's expression changed completely and Wataru glowered, wondering what that tone of voice was supposed to mean. Masa'aki's eyes filled with curiosity as he scrutinized Wataru, murmuring and sounding impressed.

"So you're Wataru Fujii. I didn't know you were so—"

"Masa'aki," Masanobu interrupted.

"Didn't know he was so *what*? Go ahead—Say it," Yuichi said.

"K-Kazuki—" Wataru said.

Kazuki ignored Masanobu's warning and Wataru's nerves. He glared a challenge, then smiled calmly and folded his arms over his chest, fixing frosty eyes on Masa'aki. Masa'aki snorted, apparently intimidated by the force of it. After briefly looking away, Masa'aki turned his gaze back to Wataru and spoke, as if in challenge.

"I've wanted to meet you, Wataru Fujii."

"You wanted to meet...me?"

"That's right. For a lot of reasons."

After his grandiose pronouncement, Masa'aki

took a sudden step forward. He brought his face so close to Wataru's that their foreheads were practically touching. Wataru started to stumble back reflexively, but Yuichi casually wrapped an arm around his shoulder to stop him.

"Hey! You're a man. You gonna let him treat you like you're a princess? You get all your boys to do that?" Masa'aki growled.

"W-what are you talking about?"

"I'm warning you, if you even think about using my brother like that, I'll never let you get away with it."

"Masa'aki!"

Masanobu's voice was harsh, echoing the warning slap he gave the back of Masa'aki's head. Twisting his face in annoyance, Masa'aki pressed a hand against his aching head and turned on Masanobu. "What are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry, Wataru. That's just my little brother. I'm sorry he was so rude to you for no reason."

"Your...little brother?"

"Yeah. This is Masa'aki. I told you how my parents took my little brother with them when they got posted abroad, right? He's a year older than you. When his college in New York City went on winter break, he came back to Japan and it doesn't look like he's going back anytime soon."

"So what? I miss Japan," Masa'aki said.

Masanobu looked put out by this snappish argument. Wataru had heard that Masanobu had a little brother, and he'd had his suspicions when Masa'aki kept saying "brother," but the impression he gave off was so

rowdy that it just hadn't connected.

Masanobu continued, "But since he's planning on staying all through February, it would be nice if we could all—"

"I've had enough of this guy. He's a real snake," interrupted Masa'aki.

"Masa'aki!"

When Masanobu scolded him, Masa'aki grew quiet for an instant, but the willfulness in his eyes never wavered. Ordinarily, Wataru would have been getting annoyed, too, but no one had ever revealed such antipathy for him at their very first meeting, so his shock was actually greater than his anger.

"What is with this guy?"

Beside him, Yuichi seemed to feel the same way, amazed that anyone could be so hostile in their very first encounter.

But one thing was absolutely clear. Masa'aki had a huge brother complex. Otherwise he never would have held such naked hostility for someone he'd never met. His own brother, the sensible Masanobu, probably wouldn't spread biased stories, so his little brother must have gotten the wrong idea on his own.

Though I'm a little afraid to guess what he got the wrong idea about.

As Wataru looked back at Masa'aki with these complex thoughts, he was met by an openly disgusted face. Was this guy really older than him? His behavior was so childish, Wataru couldn't believe it. But he was frank about his feelings, and Wataru did have to give him credit for that.

"Masa'aki, if you don't cut it out, I'm really going to get angry," Masanobu said in a frigid voice. His little brother's rudeness seemed to have used up his patience. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the belligerent attitude disappeared and Masa'aki distanced himself quickly from Wataru. Masanobu was always so placid that Wataru almost wanted to see what he was like when he got really mad, but he still breathed a sigh of relief. It was clear from Masa'aki's quick reaction, at any rate, that it would be pretty frightening.

"I'm really sorry. I'm going to give Masa'aki a good talking-to. I'm sorry for surprising you, too, Kazuki."

"I'm fine."

Yuichi had a brother, too, and it was apparently awkward for him to hear this apology. He had seemed angry at first about the rude behavior, but perhaps it was because something in Masa'aki's insolence reminded him of his own brother. Yuichi's brother Shohei was an obnoxious presence in their lives. He was opposed to Yuichi's homosexual relationship with Wataru and had tried to throw obstacles between them, but it was all out of fondness for his baby brother.

"Oh, the countdown is going to start soon. You two came to visit the temple, didn't you? You'd better get in line. It's only going to get longer after midnight. And you have to get inside to pray for Wataru's academic success."

"Who cares about that? Let's go home. Our dinner's getting cold," Masa'aki said. He had given up on tangling with Wataru, but he still wasn't going to let

his brother talk to Wataru. He was being so difficult that Masanobu gave up.

"Fine, fine. I guess we're going then. Oh right—You two were checking out that stall over there, right? It's actually a test run for a chef I know. The stuffed cabbage and stewed beef are excellent. You should get some."

"You even know chefs, Asaka?" Wataru asked.

"Well, you know. Nothing beats networking and human resources. I'll see you around, Wataru. Good luck on your exams. I'll keep my fingers crossed. And Kazuki—I'll see you back at the renovation department in the spring."

Masanobu waved casually, and then walked away with his impatient brother. They were both tall men, so they stood out in the crowd. At last they disappeared from sight and the tension slipped out of Wataru's shoulders. Yuichi's quick glance fell on him and he rested his left hand on Wataru's head.

"He definitely has the wrong idea about you," Yuichi said.

"You think so? He gave off this aura that he really worships his older brother."

"Well, if you learned anything from this, it's to not be nice to Asaka," Yuichi sniped cheerfully, and Wataru started to feel depressed. The fact that Yuichi was going out of his way to say such mean things was proof that his heart was still ill-at-ease after running into Masanobu after so long.

"Only twenty minutes till midnight. Asaka was right. We should get in line," Yuichi said.

"Yeah. The visit itself isn't going to take more than a minute. But it's not easy asking favors from the gods, is it?"

"If you talk like that..."

Yuichi didn't finish his thought, but Wataru hurried to take it back. "No, no! I didn't mean it!"

The two looked at each other and chuckled, and then turned back to the crowd to get in line.

Still, it was pretty clear:

After finishing the visit to the temple, Wataru found a coffee shop that was open all night and sat, thinking back more calmly over what had happened earlier. Being stared at so unflinchingly and getting such abuse from someone he'd just met, it was only natural that Wataru found it almost impossible to believe that someone as rude as Masa'aki was related to Masanobu, the overachieving honor student.

"Hey, Wataru. You're spacing out," Yuichi said.

"Huh?"

"Your cafe au lait is here."

Yuichi tapped on the table with his index finger and his eyes seemed to be searching Wataru's face. He didn't seem terribly interested, since he knew the source of Wataru's abstraction was the two Asaka brothers.

"Do you mind if I love you anyway?"

Masanobu's words rang in Wataru's ears as if he had spoken them yesterday.

Yuichi saw it immediately in Wataru's expression and he looked even more annoyed as he spoke. "There's

no use worrying about it now. I don't think Asaka has told him that much, even if it is his little brother."

"How can you tell?"

"From the way Masa'aki was acting. He never looked at me. If Masa'aki knew that you were already involved with someone, he would have come at me, too, since I'm his brother's rival. But he didn't look at anyone but you."

"Hey, you're right."

Yuichi let out a sigh at Wataru's belated realization.

"He probably decided to be so antagonistic after he had heard that there was someone his brother liked. When I said he had the wrong idea about you, I meant that he must think you're taking advantage of Asaka."

"Oh, well that makes sense." Wataru sounded satisfied by the explanation and got a quick but meaningful glower in return.

"Try to take it a little more seriously! A love triangle between three men is a pretty heavy topic. You can't talk about it with just anyone. Or have you done that?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

"Have you ever told Karin that you don't know what to do about another guy who likes you?"

"Come on, Kazuki—" Wataru's anger flared instinctively and his voice became rough. He didn't care how upset Yuichi was; there was no reason for him to talk like that.

A certain amount of time passed idly in awkward silence. Things had been going subtly wrong all day

since they first met up. It had all started when Wataru had been filled with doubt when he saw Yuichi looking at his cell phone in front of the station and had worried about the Christmas card.

"I'm sorry," Yuichi said after a long period of silence. He was leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed lazily over his chest as he looked at Wataru. But when Wataru didn't answer, he went on more loudly.

"I'm sorry. I went too far. Come on, I'm apologizing, so stop being upset."

"What about you? You're the one who seems upset about something. You're hiding something from me."

Wataru had held back all this time, but he was tired of speculating about something strange and ill-defined. Seeing his opportunity, Wataru rebelled and stared straight into Yuichi's eyes as he spoke.

"I mean, it was totally by accident, but...I'm sorry. I saw it," Wataru said.

"Saw what?"

"The card. The Christmas card. The one from the US."

"Wataru—"

When he heard the word "card," Yuichi's entire expression changed. Seeing his reaction was enough to make the anxiety that had been nesting in Wataru's heart flare into reality. Even though Wataru had brought it up, he was soon filled with regret.

"You saw that? How?"

Yuichi wasn't his usual confident self: he hesitated and his voice wavered faintly as he spoke. Still, he rallied

and started over, though Wataru's face was dark with an awful premonition.

"When did you see it? That time you came to visit when I was sick?"

There was no point in lying, so Wataru steeled himself and nodded. The next instant, Yuichi let out a deep sigh and fell silent again, trying to control his agitation.

I wonder if Kazuki is surprised at me. But I didn't do it on purpose...

Wataru was sure that no matter what he said it would only sound like an excuse, so he couldn't summon the energy to defend himself. With nothing better to do, Wataru brought the cold café au lait to his lips and slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

"It's from my brother's—"

A sigh of resignation fell heavily from Yuichi's lips. Wataru's eyes were still turned down, but there was no mistaking Yuichi's voice.

"It's from a friend of my brother's."

"What?"

"The person who sent the card. To be more precise, it was someone my brother used to go out with. I was in elementary school at the time and she was fond of me. She came over to our house all the time. She was eight years older than me, so...she would be twenty-seven now."

"Eight years older?"

"That's not what I'm getting at, so don't get any weird ideas. I don't have anything against older women, but I was only in sixth grade at the time. Besides, she's

my brother's ex-girlfriend. She's off-limits."

His tone was curt, but Yuichi was emphasizing that point most of all. An eight year age difference wasn't that bad, Wataru thought, but Yuichi would no doubt find it terrible if Wataru got any strange ideas. Yuichi drained his coffee brusquely and finally turned his eyes back to Wataru.

"I haven't seen her since she broke up with my brother, but she dutifully sends me a card every year. I think I was like a little brother to her. But that's all. She lives abroad now and I wouldn't go visit her anyway."

"Kazuki—"

Wataru was half dazed by the rapid-fire explanation. The way Yuichi described the situation at such length without stumbling, it almost seemed as if Yuichi had decided beforehand what he would say if this moment ever came. Even so, Wataru still had some doubts that weren't satisfied.

Why in the world does Shohei's ex-girlfriend send Yuichi Christmas cards? I don't care how close they were, that seems a little weird.

If Yuichi was in sixth grade, Shohei and the girl were going out seven years ago. The fact that she'd sent Yuichi a card every year since then meant that they were pretty close.

"Kazuki, I...um—"

"If you're not convinced, I'll bring the card the next time I see you. There's nothing on it that I'm worried about you seeing, since it's never been more than a little tradition. Would that help?"

If Yuichi was willing to make that offer, Wataru

couldn't exactly hold out for more. Still full of feeling, he didn't quite understand, Wataru focused on finishing the last of his café au lait. If he tried to say something now, he wouldn't say anything worthwhile. Even Yuichi didn't seem to think his own explanation was perfect and his expression was still clouded, but he didn't try to add anything more to his story.

Shohei's ex-girlfriend, huh?

Wataru tried to imagine what she had been like. The adult Shohei was the sort of person who seemed like a super-intelligent bully, all grown up. He treated Yuichi and Masanobu, both of them brilliant and flawless, as if they were children, and his arrogant tricks and capriciousness were all forgiven because "that's just the way he is." If this girl had chosen to be with a boy like that, there was no doubt that she had been overflowing with undeniable charm, from her looks to her personality.

His wife now is an incredible beauty, too.

She was like a little girl made of spun sugar, but she possessed the natural sex appeal and calm of an adult woman. Wataru had only met her once, but he vividly remembered her as the sort of exquisite woman he wouldn't run across very often.

But then again, Kazuki is attractive, too. He's like Shohei—no matter how gorgeous a woman he found, he would be her equal.

Wataru considered himself relatively average, a type you could find almost anywhere, and he was a boy. He sighed yet again at these self-deprecating murmurs in his heart.

"Wataru..."

After a long break in the conversation, Yuichi peered down at his watch, his voice suddenly returning to reality.

"What do you want to do? It's almost one o'clock."

"Are you serious?"

They had spent all their precious time together on a painful subject. Under normal circumstances, as the time to go home approached, Wataru's heart would have grown heavy, but today he felt relieved. He felt slightly revolted by that part of himself, but he collected himself to ask Yuichi a question.

"What about you? Are you going to go back to your parents' house?"

"Yeah. My brother and his wife are bringing Takako over tomorrow. I'm going to get stuck watching her, and she'll probably want us to go out on a date or something. She still likes me so much, it's wearing me out."

"Oh, okay. Then we won't see each other for a little while again. It's time for me to start making the last push, anyway."

"That's true."

There was a slight pause before Yuichi answered with a soft smile. Seeing his face like that, Wataru forgot how he'd wanted to hurry home only a moment ago. His heart swirled violently with emotion, and he wondered if they could leave each other feeling like this. But it was impossible to endure the gloomy atmosphere and there was no way he wanted to rehash the subject of the card.

Oh well, Wataru said to himself.

Today had been off. Wataru wanted to put on a cheerful face so they could leave without causing Yuichi any unnecessary concern.

"Then let's head home. We didn't get anything at those stalls and I'm starving."

"Wataru—"

Just as Wataru was pushing away from the table, Yuichi suddenly reached out a hand and stopped him. Wataru was rattled by this uncharacteristic act, but he focused and smiled like always.

"What's wrong, Kazuki? Normally you'd be telling me to hurry home and study."

"No, it's—Are you all right?"

"What do you mean? The subway is running tonight, and we can walk together to the station, right? What are you worried about?"

"I'm not asking about that. You're not just forcing yourself to smile, are you?"

"Kazuki—"

What was he supposed to do when Yuichi asked him that? If there was still tension between them when they were together, then it was obviously best to go home right away and cool down.

Wataru said, "Come on. Like you said, it's almost one o'clock. I have to—"

"How can I let you leave when you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Let's get out of here, at least. We're not going to get anywhere talking in here."

With that, Yuichi took his hand off Wataru's arm. Wataru felt his skin grow slowly cooler. Holding onto these jumbled thoughts, he hurried after Yuichi, who had taken the bill. The excitement of counting down to midnight had cooled and the dark neighborhood was almost eerily hushed, trying to sleep away the old year.

"What are we doing, Kazuki? Aren't we going home?"

"Let's catch a cab and go to my apartment."

"Huh?"

For a moment, Wataru couldn't believe his ears. Yuichi had just said that he was going back to his parents' house to watch his niece. Why had he changed his mind?

"You want me to go with you?"

"Of course I do. But I'm not going to force you. You need every minute and every second you have right now, and I don't even believe what I told you myself. But—"

Yuichi stopped walking and turned around, waiting for Wataru to catch up with him. When he spoke, his voice fit the crisp night air perfectly.

"It wasn't Asaka or his idiot brother who made you go through that: it was me. So that means only I can fix it, right? Look, Wataru, don't pretend."

Wataru was silent.

"It's even worse because you have a lot of stress right now. I don't want to make you put up with anything that you don't need to. But if that card is still bothering you, all I can do is show it to you to put your mind at ease, right? You might not be convinced by it, but

I—I'm not lying. So please..."

"Kazuki—"

Yuichi didn't even try to hide his single-minded purpose, and the sight warmed Wataru's heart. That warmth burned through his doubts and insecurities in an instant and filled his body with an ache. Wataru felt that Yuichi was being so earnest, and for his sake, could surpass any truth.

"Okay. I believe you, Kazuki."

"Wataru—"

"I was pretending before and didn't say anything, but this time it's true. I feel stupid for letting one little card bother me so much in the first place. So, I'm sorry."

Wataru slowly drew nearer to Yuichi and looked him in the eyes. He smiled, and wrapped his arms around Yuichi, hoping that would reassure his lover.

"H-hey," Yuichi said.

"I love you, Yuichi. I'll believe anything you tell me."

Yuichi said nothing.

"I'll study hard for my exams. I'm going to pass, because I never want to have to be away from you again. I want to be able to see your face whenever I miss you, and to be close enough that we can talk about what makes us happy."

As Wataru buried his face in Yuichi's coat, he voiced his hope fearlessly. As long as his partner's feelings were true, he only needed his own effort to make his dream come true. At last Yuichi circled his own arms around Wataru's back and squeezed him back

tightly as his answer.

"You always beat me," Yuichi murmured with a rueful smirk, his breath escaping into the darkness in a white cloud. "What am I supposed to do when you make me so happy? Every now and then you say something that cuts right to my heart."

"Well, today I learned the hard way that putting up with something just for show doesn't accomplish much. Besides, I'm not smart enough to just stop thinking about something and focus on studying."

"I know. That's why I wanted to take you back to my apartment."

Yuichi's decorous statement, delivered with a pompously affected look, made Wataru stare up at him in surprise. But Yuichi, whose mood had turned around completely, grinned, satisfied even by such an unsexy response. He brought his face closer to Wataru's unabashedly, until their foreheads were pressed together and he asked, "Well? Are you going to go home and study?"

"Uh—"

"Doesn't matter to me either way. I'll do whatever you decide. So go ahead. Be quick."

"You think I can just go home? You jerk!" Wataru protested, turning red, and Yuichi finally burst out laughing. Wataru began by being annoyed, but eventually he was pulled along and he smiled. At long last, the boys' laughter drifted brightly into the new, slumbering night.

"Aw, man, I can't get this. My mind is a wreck."

Frowning deeply as he sat at his desk, Wataru folded his arms and glared at his study guide. The rest of the world was still floating on the joy of the New Year, but three days in and Wataru's mind was already devoted to exams again. He simply could not solve the problem he had been working on since the night before, but he was too distracted to switch subjects. As a result, he found he couldn't focus on anything at all.

"This English grammar is so complicated! Why do I always have to change the word from the infinitive? As long as it makes sense, who cares? Plus I—"

"Wataru? What are you grumbling about in there?"

"Agh! K-Karin! Don't go peeping into other people's rooms like that!"

Wataru hadn't noticed Karin come in, but now she stood in his open door, looking at him suspiciously. Wataru was embarrassed and he put on a sour face as he snapped at her. "What do you want? If you don't need anything, I'm busy, so—"

"Oh come on! I could hear you muttering yourself out in the hall, so I was worried and came to see how you were doing. You sounded crazed."

"Shut up!"

"It's a nice day out today, so why don't you go outside for a change? You haven't left the house since you came back on New Year's morning. A lot of the stores are open again and everything."

"Karin—"

Karin was trying to cheer up her incompetent

brother the way only a little sister could. He regretted taking his frustration out on her and he agreed meekly.

"I *have* been cooped up in here for three days. I just hit a wall, so I guess I can try going to the library. Maybe if I change my environment I'll be able to concentrate."

"That's true, too. Also, when you come back, can you buy some ice cream at the store? The one shaped like a cat. You told me you like it, too, didn't you? They've got a new flavor out."

"I can't believe you."

She had asked him to buy it so suddenly and with such a bright smile that it must have been her goal all along, Wataru realized wearily. But since his little sister always asked him for things like that, he could hardly refuse her, either.

That reminds me, I wonder what Asaka is up to.

As Wataru got ready to go out, his eyes fell on the study guide Masanobu had given him. Wataru hadn't received an e-mail from him since they'd run into each other on New Year's Eve at the temple. It wasn't as if they'd been in constant communication beforehand, but they had parted somewhat awkwardly due to his psychotic little brother's interference. Wataru would be lying if he said it wasn't bothering him.

It's not for me to say, but...I wish a nice, affectionate girl who would watch out for Asaka would come along.

His feelings were opposite of Yuichi's: Wataru didn't hate Asaka. In fact, being liked by someone like Asaka would have made Wataru feel innocently happy—

if he ignored their current situations. But it wasn't love. Wataru respected Masanobu and wanted to help him if it was within his power, but those feelings were different from his feverish love for Yuichi.

That means I have to watch how I act.

Wataru would be sad if he lost Masanobu's brotherly presence because he said something out of selfishness. Wataru had no male siblings and Masanobu was an ideal older figure he could rely on. But what Masa'aki had called him, *a snake*, was lurking in a corner of Wataru's mind. He had never intended anything, but it was only natural that an outsider might think he was taking advantage of Masanobu.

The only thing I can't forgive is saying I get treated like a princess. But I'll try not to show Asaka any weakness if I can help it and let him know where he stands bit by bit.

All right, Wataru thought, refreshing himself. He packed a bundle of study guides into his bag and swung it over his shoulder. He had all sorts of things on his mind, but there was only one month left before the critical exams. First he would clear the obstacle immediately before him, and then he would address everything else.

"I'm leaving now, Karin.

"Have fun! Don't forget the ice cream!"

His innocent sister's goodbye behind him, Wataru stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight.

There was a public library Wataru often use

inside a large park twenty minutes from his house. He had often gone there with Kawamura on days that they didn't have prep classes, but now his friend was cramming, too, so they couldn't take the time to study together anymore.

We pumped ourselves up with the idea of taking a trip together if we both pass, but I don't think Kazuki would like it if I told him about that, Wataru thought. He could just imagine Yuichi's reaction.

You've spent so much time working hard. Now that you're free, I want to monopolize you!

Yuichi would try not to pressure Wataru, and then pretend to be uninterested while he told Wataru to have a good time. Wataru could just see it. *I really adore that part of him,* Wataru thought as he stood absently in front of a bookshelf. Suddenly, he heard a voice.

"Um—Excuse me. I'd like to put this shelf in order."

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. I'll get out of your way."

Wataru spun around quickly and got another shock.

"You're Asaka's—"

"Wataru Fujii?"

They spoke at practically the same time and disbelief filled both their faces. But there was a nameplate reading "Asaka" pinned to the boy's patchwork zip-up sweatshirt.

What on earth was Asaka's little brother doing in a place like this? Wataru couldn't process the situation, but Masa'aki was quicker to recover. He returned to work, his eyes falling to the hardcover books in his

arms to check the title of each volume as he re-shelved it. Then, still looking at the book covers, he spoke as if to himself.

"I never pegged you as the type I would run into at the library."

"W-well, you neither! You're only back in Japan temporarily, aren't you? What are you doing getting a job at a place like this?"

"What do you care? My dad knows somebody, so I've been working here as a temp since the end of last year. I'm not like some people, who use their exams as an excuse to spend time zoning out."

"Excuse me?!"

Wataru choked back his voice, which had gotten dangerously loud from his fervor. But the more he held back, the angrier he became and he found it impossible to control his emotions.

"Just who do you think you are?" Wataru shot back at Masa'aki, lowering his voice as best he could. "You've been hostile to me since the first time you saw me, and I don't get why. What did I ever do to you? Just tell me that, if you can!"

"To me? Nothing. You did it to my brother."

"Huh?"

Wataru's heart fluttered and his face stiffened. Masa'aki didn't miss that reaction and his gaze hardened, as if he'd caught Wataru. His face was firm and resembled Masanobu's in the basic details, but perhaps because his personality was so fraught with ups and downs, Wataru sensed that he and Masa'aki share something in common.

"W-what did I do to your brother?"

"Don't stutter."

The cold reproach made Wataru's cheeks burn. "Shut up!" he spat. *This is almost like talking to Kawamura*, he thought, as Masa'aki turned back to face him after he finally finished re-shelving the books.

"You're that Kazuki guy's underclassman, right? You have no connection to my brother whatsoever, so don't cozy up to him. Geez, I leave Japan for a little bit and people start taking advantage."

"Hey, stop badmouthing me! When did I ever—"

"Are you saying you didn't?"

Masa'aki's childish tone betrayed his appearance and revealed his annoyance. He glared down at Wataru from a few inches' height and took a smooth step forward, as if to menace him.

"It's because you're here. Because of you, my brother and I don't—" Masa'aki started, full of anger, and then suddenly closed his mouth. But from Masa'aki's hateful expression, Wataru knew he wanted to hear what he would have said next. The reason Masa'aki had such antipathy for him no doubt lay there.

"Why don't you say it? Because of me, Asaka doesn't *what*?"

"Shut up! I'm working! Stop bothering me."

Masa'aki spit out these few words, then went back to the cart he'd left in the aisle and pushed it quickly away, disappearing. Wataru couldn't go after him and interfere with his job, so he simply stood there, dazed.

"What is with that guy?"

His second encounter with Masa'aki had gone

exactly the same. Wataru could hardly believe he was Masanobu's younger brother. They resembled each other in appearance only. Masa'aki's attitude was rough, his gaze was nasty, and he was belligerent. It probably wasn't much fun to find out the brother you loved has fallen for someone your age, but he had taken it too far. Wataru hadn't taken the bait out of a sense of obligation toward Masanobu, but he could no longer ignore Masa'aki's single-minded attacks.

Man...that killed my energy.

Students who wanted to study usually used individual reading rooms, but since Wataru had left late, there were none left. He sat down at a window overlooking the park and got his pens and notebooks out of his bag. But while he was flipping through the pages of his study guide, the exchange with Masa'aki came to mind yet again.

He said "my brother and I don't," and then stopped suddenly. He's not a kid anymore, so he can't be blaming me because he and his brother don't get along or hang out. Besides, when we saw them at the shrine, it looked like Masanobu liked him well enough.

Wataru remembered Masanobu smiling at his brother prodding him to go home. No matter how he looked at it, they seemed to get along perfectly. He was almost jealous of them.

But it's not like I don't understand how he feels. If I had an older brother like Asaka, I might develop a brother complex, too. That's where Kazuki is a problem. He would just tease me, and—

"That's not right. It's 'he will need,' not 'he needs.'"

Wataru's thoughts were suddenly pulled back by a gentle voice he heard from overhead. "If you read the problem carefully, his need is in the future, so—"

"Asaka?"

"Hello, Wataru. I've never seen you studying in the library before."

Masanobu smiled at him brightly as he pointed to an example in the study guide. Wataru was not at all mentally prepared to see him so close and he blushed, caught off guard. He had been lost in thought, he hadn't heard Masanobu coming.

"You're in the final countdown now, but you look like you're working hard. There's logic in your mistakes now, unlike before. When I was checking your English, there were a lot of questions you didn't even understand."

"Uh—uh, why are you—"

"My brother is working here part-time. He gets off soon, so I promised I would come pick him up. He's planning to go back to America next month, so there are a lot of places he wants to go first. He gets his way every single day, so it's a challenge taking care of him."

It was strange to hear Masanobu say he was "taking care" of a man who was almost twenty, but the word fit Masa'aki so perfectly that Wataru wanted to laugh. If he'd said it within Masa'aki's earshot, he would have gotten indignant, but Wataru couldn't deny that that image itself made him laugh, too.

"Do you mind if I join you for a bit, Wataru?"

Dressed in a soft sweater with an expensively tailored jacket and pants, Masanobu waited for Wataru

to nod, and then quietly sat down in the chair next to him. No matter how often Wataru saw Masanobu perform that fluid motion, he never got used to it.

"I'm sorry to bother you while you're studying. But after the last time, I'm just so happy that I ran into you by chance. Masa'aki should be here in a few minutes anyway, so I'll leave then."

"It's fine. I should thank you for finding that mistake for me."

"Talking like this reminds me of the summertime, when I was your tutor. We used to go out to all sorts of places together. That was an extra perk for me."

"O-oh yeah?"

The conversation had taken a turn into delicate territory, so Wataru cut in quickly. It made him feel awkward to be told he was a perk, since he had done nothing but accept Masanobu's help.

"Um—oh yeah. I just saw your brother a little while ago."

"You did?"

As soon as he said that, Masanobu's eyes clouded over. His face showed that he didn't even need to ask what they'd said to each other. Someone like Masa'aki was probably hurling abuse at Wataru even when they were at home. Masanobu sighed in frustration and looked at Wataru apologetically.

"He was rude to you again, wasn't he?"

"Well, not rude exactly—"

"It's all right. Be honest. I feel terrible about New Year's Eve, too."

"But that wasn't your fault."

"Yes it was."

Masanobu firmly rejected Wataru's excuses and Wataru temporarily ran out of things to say. But even if he asked what Masa'aki had said to Masanobu, he didn't think Masanobu would tell him. He was afraid to ask anyway.

"I'm sorry, Wataru. Masa'aki isn't a bad person deep down, but maybe he's been acting like that because we've been apart lately. I mean, I have given him reasons to worry about me, so it's not totally unreasonable."

"You have?"

"Oh, it's nothing. You're sure he didn't say anything to you?"

Masanobu looked into Wataru's eyes and Wataru could no longer lie convincingly. Even if he said nothing, as soon as Masa'aki came, the sham would be revealed. He was reluctant to tell on Masa'aki, but he hesitantly began to speak.

"Well, he, uh, he made a declaration of war against me..."

"War?"

Apparently Wataru had unwittingly chosen the perfect phrase and Masanobu's face twisted in pain. He was always flush with confidence and was skilled in hiding his displeasure, so it was the first time he hadn't tried hiding his anger.

"Oh, but it didn't really bother me..."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to have to talk to Masa'aki," Masanobu said with a frown, cutting off the rest of what Wataru had been saying.

"I only mentioned you in passing," Masanobu

went on. "But that kid's gotten all kinds of strange ideas. We were having some problems at home when I told him, though, so I guess it was bad timing."

"Problems? Did something happen?"

"It's fine. It wasn't anything important. Masa'aki just associated it with you in his mind. He's impulsive, and very stubborn in his opinions, so even if I tell him he's wrong, he won't listen."

In that, he's a little like you. Wataru could hear Masanobu saying those words with his eyes. The fact that he didn't get carried away and say it aloud made him an adult.

"Masa'aki has been pretty attached to me since we were little, but two years ago we started living apart. I think that caused some friction. I stayed behind because I had just started college, but Masa'aki was a junior in high school, so it was easy for him to transfer to a school there. Our parents wanted to take at least one of us with them, so we persuaded him to move to America."

"Then Masa'aki is the same age as Kazuki. He really seems to care about you."

"I suppose. I wish he would get a girlfriend over there, but even though he goes out, he doesn't seem to have any interest in a serious relationship. He skipped a year of high school and went straight to college, so I suppose he's pretty busy studying, too."

"He *skipped* a year?"

Wataru's voice rose unintentionally, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. There weren't many people in the main reading room so early in the New Year, so luckily he escaped being glared at by anyone.

"So that means he's—"

"A junior in college. Same as me. He doesn't look it, but he's very good at math. It might not be too much of an exaggeration to say that he managed to skip purely because of mathematics."

So Masa'aki really was Masanobu's brother; he wasn't just a crass simpleton after all. As far as Wataru could tell, Masa'aki didn't seem that exceptional, but maybe it was just that he loved his older brother so much it made him do stupid things.

"I may be his older brother, but I think he's a good, smart kid. He's bold and happy-go-lucky, so people love him wherever he goes. But why does he turn into such a brat when it comes to me?"

"Yeah. But I suppose—"

"Masanobu, what are you doing?" Masa'aki's harsh voice broke into their conversation. "You were supposed to meet me at the front desk. Why are you getting friendly with this jerk?"

"Masa'aki..."

"I was waiting for you so long I wondered if you were actually coming, but now I find out *you* were holding my brother up."

Masa'aki slammed his fist down violently on the table and glared at Wataru frigidly. *This is just going to compound the misunderstanding*, Wataru realized wearily, but Masanobu scolded his brother sharply.

"Just cool it, Masa'aki. If you keep acting so rudely to Wataru, you don't want to find out what I'll do."

"Masanobu—"

"I won't go anywhere else with you while you're here."

"No! You wouldn't!"

Masa'aki was clearly panicked and he pulled back his hand in a show of good will. Watching events unfold, Wataru was unexpectedly moved by how effective Masanobu's threat had been.

"Are you saying you're taking Wataru Fujii's side against your own brother? So that's how it is, then. He's the reason you won't hear me out after all."

"How many times do I have to tell you, that's not—"

"Why do you think I came all the way from New York? If that's how you're going to act, then I'm just going to get even worse!"

"Masa'aki!"

Masanobu's shocked, admonishing tone was totally unlike the one he used with his friends and underclassmen at the club: it was exactly what an older brother would say. Although Wataru felt a little envious of that, when he heard the words "New York" shouted from Masa'aki's mouth, he remembered Yuichi's card and his heart began to beat faster in confusion.

Geez, am I that obsessive? Why am I thinking about that card at a time like this?

He'd said he believed Yuichi's explanation, and he thought that had put an end to the subject, but the fact that it had been postmarked in New York stirred up bitter feelings again. Wataru hated himself for that, and he bolted up from his chair suddenly.

"I'm sorry. I, uh, have a lot of studying to do. I'll

just go home."

"Wataru—"

Wataru gave a passable goodbye and shoved his things back into his bag, and then hurried away. He was sure he had an ugly expression on his face just then, and he didn't want Masanobu or Masa'aki to see him like that.

The card is just a tradition. She was Shohei's girlfriend. There's nothing between her and Yuichi. So there's no reason for me to be thinking about it. Isn't that what Kazuki told me?

Wataru couldn't deny that there was something fishy about the explanation, but he'd sworn to Yuichi that he believed him. He wanted to keep that promise, but Wataru loathed more than anything the part of himself that felt such jealousy.

What am I even doing? What's got me so upset about that card?

Wataru left the library and darted across the park's walkways, and then pressed toward home. The sun was beginning to set and the temperature outside was rapidly dropping. Wataru's white breaths clouded his vision.

"It's from someone my brother used to go out with."

Suddenly, Yuichi's somber, brooding voice resurfaced in his mind. What had his face looked like as he spoke those words?

"Kazuki—"

Try as he might, Wataru couldn't remember.

Winter break came to an end, but attendance

was still optional for students who were studying for the exams. Down to one month before the mock exam, Wataru buried himself in a last spurt of effort, endlessly circling a track between home and his prep classes. His exam was on the same day as Kawamura, who was shooting for H University, so they sent each other encouraging text messages, and sometimes they would chat during a break. Kawamura had just sent a message saying that things were going pretty well between him and a girl in college. He cheerfully boasted that if he passed, she was going to go on a date with him as a reward.

"Huh. The day is coming when Kawamura is going to need a set of rings, too."

Wataru imagined his best friend's face and it made him happy, too. Kawamura was a good friend. He had never been prejudiced against Wataru for having a boyfriend. His generous nature made him treat them like any other couple. His brashness had saved Wataru more than once, and his incisive advice had often made Wataru rethink things.

"Three in the morning? Oh, no. I wanted to get up early tomorrow and reset my internal clock."

Wataru hurried to get a grip on himself and held his pencil tightly. It was one of the ones Yuichi had used when he took his exam, and Wataru had inherited it out of superstition.

Wataru was about halfway through his workbook when his cell phone started to play "When You Wish Upon a Star." Wataru had set that ring-tone especially for one person, and he checked the phone incredulously.

Yuichi was always too reserved to send anything but text messages, but for the first time in a long while he was calling.

"Sorry to call so late, Wataru. Did I wake you? I was just wondering how you're doing."

"I was up. I'm in the middle of studying." Wataru tilted his head curiously.

It was one thing to hope Yuichi would call, but Yuichi wasn't the type to call just on a whim. And this wasn't an hour when you could casually call someone.

"Wataru? Are you all right?"

"Oh, it's nothing. It's just been a while since I heard your voice. I was just letting it wash over me," he answered, deliberately joking, and he heard a faint laugh on the other end of the phone. Wataru laughed along with Yuichi and tried to stop being nosy about his reasons for calling.

"You mentioned in one of your messages there's only a month before you go up against the real thing."

"Yeah, I spend all day long studying. My whole world is home and prep classes. I'm getting a backlog of shows I want to watch on TV. If I didn't have e-mail, I would die of loneliness."

"What a load," Yuichi muttered and laughed again, and then he fell into a brief silence. It wasn't the frustrating sort of silence when they misunderstood each other's feelings, but a sweet, gentle moment of being enveloped by a sense of satisfaction.

There really is a huge difference between reading an e-mail and hearing someone's voice, Wataru thought to himself as he gazed up at the ceiling, holding the

phone to his ear. They shared this moment. It had living warmth, which didn't come through the inorganic letters of a text message.

"Kazuki—" Wataru realized that he was saying Yuichi's name rapturously. "I miss you. I want to see you so badly."

"Wataru—"

"We haven't seen each other since New Year's. It's been a whole week. I get stuffed full of study, study, study, all the time, but I'm running out of my reserve of you."

"You might forget someone else, but not my face. Not after a week," Yuichi said with self-assurance. Just like always, Wataru thought with a smirk. He doubted anyone would easily forget a face as handsome as Yuichi's. His fierce gaze, his sharply handsome features, his arrogant and entitled smile. There was no one else like him in the world, with an exquisite balance that accentuated his charm.

"I don't mean I would forget you," Wataru answered obediently, sighing up at the ceiling. "I feel like I remember you too much and I'll wear out my memory of you. No matter how much I concentrate on studying, you're never completely out of my mind."

"It must be because it's so late that you're coming up with such incredible lines."

"Oh, am I?"

Yuichi sighed in an exasperated tone, as if covering for his embarrassment. But just saying the words "I miss you" had eased Wataru's feelings a lot.

"All right, now I'm motivated. I think I can keep going till morning," Wataru said.

"You bounce back fast."

"I just needed to talk out loud to clear my mind. Whether I like it or not, there's one month to go. I tell myself that by this time next month, I'll be able to stand and gaze at the moon with you."

"Yeah, that will be really nice. Good luck, Wataru."

Yuichi's voice had an oddly touching quality that made Wataru ache. Yuichi's voice sounded terribly feeble. Was it just the tranquility of the night deep around them that made it seem that way? The next moment, his voice had returned to its usual haughtiness, but Wataru was lost in thought for a little while, gripping the phone.

I wonder why Yuichi called me all of a sudden?

Wataru decided it was to encourage him on the home stretch, but there must have been some other reason. But in the end, he had nothing more than conjecture and he couldn't accomplish anything fretting over the reasons.

Shouldn't Kazuki be asleep instead of calling me at this hour? He doesn't have any club stuff with the renovation group during winter break, so he told me he was going to be busy with work and writing essays. Everything's arranged perfectly.

What Wataru found incredible about Yuichi was that he could gradually cut back on his sleep in order to keep up with his job and his studies and still function. Apparently, after a while his body couldn't overtake his brain, and no matter how exhausted he was he couldn't fall asleep.

The last time we slept together was...New Year's Eve? And the next time won't be until after the exams.

Wataru slowly returned the phone to its charger and let out a deep sigh. There was only one more month of this frustration to put up with. He stretched hard and refocused his energy to tackle the rest of the problems quickly.

He struggled with a slightly complicated word problem in math, and then solved three more problems. Immediately after he finished the last of them, his phone began ringing again, this time announcing a text message. Wataru moved without thinking, assuming it was from Kawamura, and glanced casually down at the screen.

Look outside.

"Huh?"

Bewildered by the short message, he checked the sender in case it was some sort of prank. There he saw the name "Yuichi Kazuki," whom he had only finished talking to just a little while before.

"K-Kazuki? But...what the—?!"

Confused, Wataru ran to the window and impatiently pulled the curtain aside to lean outside. Goosebumps prickled on his skin in the freezing air, but his eyes fell unerringly on the pale shadows under a street lamp. He saw Yuichi holding his cell phone, looking up at him with a triumphant smile.

"N-no way! What—"

Wataru had said that he wanted to see Yuichi. But he had only said it for his own benefit; he hadn't meant anything by it. He *did* miss Yuichi, but it was the

middle of the night in the middle of winter, and Yuichi's apartment wasn't close by.

"But still...just because I said..."

Wataru remembered what Yuichi had told him: *If you ever want to see me, even just for a few minutes, just call me.*

"Kazuki—"

Wataru shot away from the window and grabbed and grabbed his jacket. Just as he was about to leave his room, he got another message from Yuichi: *Don't go outside. You can't afford to catch cold.* But Wataru couldn't heed such an insane order.

"Kazuki!"

Wataru dropped his voice so that it wouldn't echo through the neighborhood as he ran up and threw himself against Yuichi. Flustered by Wataru's ardent welcome, Yuichi gasped out white clouds and spoke to Wataru like a pet dog. "Hey, calm down. You shouldn't have come outside. What if you catch a cold?"

"How can you say something so cold-hearted? Did you come by taxi? For me?"

"Yeah. It's a little far to take a bike, and definitely not the right season."

Yuichi's attitude was as obnoxiously blasé as ever. But tonight, Wataru was so happy he couldn't worry about anything Yuichi said, no matter how provoking.

"Why did you text me? If I hadn't noticed, you would have done all that for nothing," Wataru said.

"I thought you might actually be asleep. And if

you were, it would have been sad to wake you up if I'd called. But you were working, just like you said. I'm impressed."

"I told you I would!"

Wataru finally calmed down slightly and pulled away from Yuichi, as if sorry to leave him. He really wanted to stay in his arms much longer, but they still needed to talk and he couldn't do that with his face in Yuichi's chest. Yuichi seemed to disagree though.

"K-Kazuki?"

Once Wataru had pulled away a little, Yuichi's strong arms pulled him back again. Wataru was hugged close, folded up in Yuichi's arms so tightly he could barely breathe. Their breath mingled in white clouds between them and their bodies, cooled by the night air, warmed again with each other's heat.

"Don't go, Wataru," Yuichi whispered against his ear, begging sweetly. Wataru's earlobe grew oddly moist from Yuichi's breath and his eyes closed to let an awkward pleasure wash over him.

They stayed like that for a little bit, silent, until Yuichi relaxed his arms, finally satisfied. They looked into each other's eyes, incredibly close, and as a slight smile crept over Yuichi's face, Wataru saw none of the sadness he'd heard on the phone.

"I doubt anyone will see us out here in the middle of the night, but..." Yuichi started as he pulled a little away from the light of the street lamp and stood in a spot where the shadows were deeper. Wataru took his fill of Yuichi's face, even as he was grumbling to cover up his embarrassment.

"Somehow it's starting to feel real now. It's really you, isn't it?" Wataru asked.

"Did that build up your reserve to last a while?"

"Oh, uh—that was—"

"Don't try to talk your way out of it. You like my face, don't you?"

Yuichi's words were taunting, but it was something he could only say because he was so handsome. If Yuichi stayed quiet, he could pass for a beloved prince, but as soon as he opened his mouth, the impression changed to an arrogant prince. Wataru knew that transformation was Yuichi's nature, but even he was sometimes shocked by it.

"Thank you for coming, Kazuki."

"Wataru—"

"I wish I could make you understand how happy I am. But we have to leave this sort of thing for the future. Otherwise it'll be too distracting."

With Wataru's eagerness clear on his face, his speech was thoroughly unconvincing. He fought back a smile and gazed up at Yuichi.

"I love you, Kazuki."

"I didn't need much encouragement to head over here. I missed you a lot, too," Yuichi confessed, and then leaned in, meeting Wataru's lips with his own.

"Mmm—"

The sensation was cold as ice, melting a little each time they touched, and their kisses gradually grew deeper. Their breath, warmed by their love, coursed between their lips.

"I love you, Wataru—"

Squeezed tightly in Yuichi's arms, Wataru was intoxicated by the sound of their overlapping heartbeats.

I love you, too, he whispered in his heart, gently circling his arms around Yuichi's waist.

"I don't like making a sudden request like this, either. You don't have any time left before your exams and I know every second is precious for you. But I'd like to ask your cooperation for this one thing, for the peace of the Kazuki family."

"For the peace of the Kazuki family?"

"You must break off your engagement to my daughter. That much, at least, is your duty."

Wataru was speechless. Things had started off awkwardly, and at some point the request had practically become a threat. Wataru sighed inwardly in exasperation and Masanobu broke in, surprised.

"Let's be serious, Shohei."

"I am serious. My dear only daughter is important to me. The fact that I've come to this dark-eyed kid's home proves how serious I am, don't you think?"

"In that case, you have to ask more graciously. Wataru is facing a major trial in his life. It may be for little Takako's benefit, but it's not serious enough yet."

As Masanobu lectured earnestly, Shohei kept his cool and showed no sign of remorse. Wataru didn't doubt that he was concerned about his daughter, but the fact that he had come to Wataru's house at all was rather extraordinary.

But Wataru still couldn't hide his confusion. The night before, Yuichi had come to see him unexpectedly, and now his older brother appeared. Wataru had finished up studying until morning and had been power-napping when these two came over and woke him up. Plus, as soon as Wataru had come into the living room, Shohei had demanded he come over to his house. Perplexed by the fact that Shohei had come to see him, Wataru had been on his guard, still waking up in the process.

"So basically, you're asking me to go see Takako?" Wataru asked hesitantly, sitting across from them.

Whatever the case, Shohei was so underhanded not even Yuichi or Masanobu were any match for him. Wataru didn't know if he was using his daughter as the pretext in some plot, so he didn't want to offer the slightest opening.

When Shohei had found out that his little brother's lover was a boy, he had declared himself to be an "enemy" of Wataru's, so as far as Wataru was concerned, Shohei Kazuki was a person he didn't want to be around.

"Um, I don't really get it. Is something the matter with Takako?"

"Puru is sick."

Masanobu was quicker to answer, perhaps concerned that if he left things up to Shohei, they would only get further derailed. He was working as an assistant in Shohei's office, but he'd apparently been dragged in to give directions, since he knew how to get to Wataru's house.

"Takako's dog?"

"Yes. When Takako graduated from preschool, I

bought him for her. She treats him like a little brother. He had to be hospitalized for a respiratory infection," Shohei explained with unusual brevity. "His condition got worse last week and two days ago they operated on him. It was a success, but he can't come home yet. So, Takako's depressed."

"She's—?"

"It's as if she were sick herself. She says she has a fever, or that she'll cry at night, and she doesn't eat or talk as much. All she talks about is 'poor Puru.' He was having a hard time, too, so we took Takako to the vet to see him, but the sight must have been more of a shock than we thought."

Shohei's face was earnest and he smiled ruefully. Wataru realized that Shohei was helpless.

"And in Kirie's opinion..." Kirie was Shohei's wife, Takako's mother. Hearing this story pained Wataru, but now her refined, gentle face floated through his mind.

"What did she say?" Wataru asked.

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

Shohei glared at Wataru, as if challenging him to guess, but Wataru had no idea. Wataru stared back blankly and, seeing this, Masanobu once again helped out.

"Takako is very fond of you, right? You're almost like her first love."

"Huh? Y-you mean, because of—?"

"So they're thinking that if she sees you it will cheer her up. She hasn't seen you lately, and apparently she's been talking about how lonely she is. They say

Kazuki hasn't been coming around much, either. Though that's because someone played a nasty trick on him at the school festival and it put him in a bad mood."

"Masanobu, that's a bit too much detail."

Masanobu's speech was meant to draw Shohei into the conversation, but predictably, Shohei let out a reluctant grumble. But he seemed to understand his position and sat up straighter, looking straight into Wataru's eyes as he spoke.

"I apologize for interrupting you during this crucial time, but will you please come see Takako? If this continues, she really will get sick. As her father, I want to give her what she wants. But I can't bring Puru home while he's recuperating, so that leaves only you."

"I wonder what Wataru thinks of being put on the same level as a dog?" Masanobu asked.

"Quiet, Masanobu. In any case, I need your help," Shohei said.

"All right," Wataru answered at once. No matter how much time he had to study, it wouldn't be enough, and now that he'd found out that Takako was depressed, he couldn't just ignore it.

"Takako is like a little sister to me, too. If I can make her happy, I'll go see her right now. I'd be thrilled if I could cheer her up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I can't take long, but going to visit her should be fine."

Shohei was clearly relieved, and Wataru gazed at him with strange emotions. Ever since they had first met, Wataru felt nothing but tension with him. Wataru

had been oppressed by his mocking smile and his aura, which was impossible to defy. All his memories were of being at Shohei's mercy. He had never imagined that the day might come when Shohei would thank him graciously.

"I apologize for the short notice, but could you come tomorrow, on the weekend?"

"Tomorrow? Is that okay?"

"Sure. I'm sure you have to get back to studying."

Wataru nodded, a little suspicious of Shohei's sudden sincerity. Beside him, Masanobu wore a complex expression and looked at Shohei warningly, as if wondering what he intended to do next.

"By the way—Wataru?"

"Yes?"

"Have you seen Yuichi recently?"

The topic shifted so suddenly, Wataru couldn't follow it at first. But he wasn't stupid enough to say that they had just seen each other last night, since he had no idea what Shohei was thinking.

"We write a lot, but we don't have time to see each other. Though we did go out on New Year's Eve together. But why do you ask?" Wataru inquired sourly.

"I was just wondering if Yuichi had told you anything." Shohei smiled radiantly.

Wataru had assumed that since their business was finished, Shohei and Masanobu would leave, but now that Shohei had extracted Wataru's promise to visit, he returned to his natural demeanor. His question seemed to hint at something and stuck in Wataru's mind, but Wataru was determined not to fall for it again and he

struggled to maintain his composure.

"Let's go, Shohei," Masanobu said as he stood up regally, seeming grateful that the discussion had ended. "We've done what we came to do, so let's head out. Wataru has studying to do, anyway."

"I know. Masanobu, you ought to be nicer to me. You treat us so differently. You see it, too, don't you Wataru?"

"Huh?"

"It's so hard being someone's favorite, isn't it?"

Wataru had no idea how to respond to this question, which penetrated all of his anxieties. Shohei gazed contentedly at Wataru's perplexed expression, then gave in to Masanobu's suggestion and stood up from the couch.

"We have a meeting at the office tomorrow, but after that I'll come pick you up. Takako will be thrilled. Thank you."

"Y-you're leaving?"

"Yes. Masanobu's upset with me."

"W-wait a minute."

The two men were already pulling on their jackets, but Wataru hurried to stop them. Masanobu looked over at him in surprise and Shohei's lips curled in a wide grin.

"What did you mean when you asked if Yuichi had told me anything? Is something the matter?" Wataru asked.

"Did that bother you?" Shohei asked.

Wataru momentarily regretted falling for his trap, but if it concerned Yuichi, he couldn't ignore it. Shohei

was the sort of person who was always stirring things up and he had to be closely watched at all times, but he had never told a lie. Though he'd spoken up to worry Wataru, the fact that he'd said anything meant that something was going on.

"Do you want me to answer that here, dark-eyed boy?" Shohei asked, his eyes disturbingly kind. It was as if he was offering to comfort Wataru. A bad premonition seized Wataru and he briefly hesitated to pursue it further.

But—

Multiple tendrils of doubt had already put down roots. The Christmas card and the late night phone call were both insignificant events, but Wataru couldn't imagine how much regret he would feel if something irrevocable happened because he'd ignored them.

I trust Yuichi. I don't know what Shohei knows, but if Yuichi hasn't said anything to me, he has a reason for it. But...

But Yuichi might have preferred to let himself get hurt rather than tell Wataru about it. The thing Wataru feared most was not noticing if Yuichi was suffering.

"Please tell me," Wataru said, steadying himself as he looked up at Shohei.

Masanobu let out a restrained sigh and looked away from Wataru.

"Don't look so heroic," Shohei said with jarring nonchalance as his slender fingers buttoned up his jacket. "He didn't say anything about going somewhere, or you two being separated from each other? Nothing like that?"

"Huh?"

Wataru suddenly remembered what Yuichi had said when he had been sick.

"If we ever split up for whatever reason..."

"I would think he'd said *something*," Shohei went on, but quickly reading Wataru's face, Shohei spoke with something like sympathy. "Listen, Wataru."

"Y-yes?"

"Yuichi might not be with you when you're taking your exams."

"Won't be with me? What does that-"

Shohei had said it so smoothly that Wataru was slow to comprehend his meaning. But he had heard right and not imagined anything; Shohei's words lingered starkly in his ears.

"Yuichi is...leaving?"

"Just so you know, this is all hypothetical. Don't jump to any conclusions."

"But you—"

"The fact that Yuichi hasn't said anything is proof that he doesn't know what he's doing yet. Or maybe he chose to stay with you. I haven't heard anything, but his choice should become clear soon."

Shohei's words whirled around in Wataru's mind and he was stunned into silence. Yuichi talked about what they would do after the exams all the time, and they couldn't have made more promises if they'd been seeing each other every day. Wataru couldn't believe that Yuichi had been lying. He hadn't seemed to be hiding anything.

"Let's stop talking and go, Shohei. Yuichi will get

angry with you again," Masanobu said as he pressed Shohei. His voice was prickly as if he could hardly stand to see Wataru in such a state of shock. Wataru couldn't tell if he knew what was going on or not.

"Um, excuse me," Wataru said.

"Hm?"

"Someone you used to go out with—"

It was a question even Wataru hadn't expected. The idea that Yuichi would be going away had perfectly overlaid the memory of the Christmas card that was thoughtfully sent to him every year. If there was anything he had been silent about, Wataru could only think of that awkward explanation.

"Someone I used to go out with? What time frame are we talking about here?"

"When Yuichi—"

Shohei waited silently.

"When Yuichi was in elementary school. Someone who was very fond of him."

That was all he said before Shohei knew who he was talking about. He covered it up skillfully, but the look in his eyes had obviously changed. It was like the disappointment of a child when someone discovers the secret stash of candy they were hoping to enjoy later.

"Even if you know about the past, I don't think it will make the future much easier," Shohei said.

"Shohei—"

Wataru's pathetic voice must have pleased him because Shohei softened his gaze. What he said was true, and if Yuichi found out that they had talked about this, he would be extremely upset.

Knowing about the past won't make the future any easier. I think that's true. But still...

Where did Wataru want to go? What sort of future did he want to build with Yuichi? As Wataru's thoughts scattered, Masanobu suddenly started walking toward the front door.

"Excuse me. I'll go wait outside."

"Asaka?" Wataru said.

"Hey, what's wrong, Masanobu?" Shohei asked. His voice was slightly harried, like he was. Resting one hand on the living room door, Masanobu turned to look over his shoulder, an expression as uneasy as Wataru's on his face.

"You only have a little while left before your exams, right, Wataru?"

"Uh—"

"In that case—" He tried to force a smile, and his lovely face twisted sadly. "Don't negate all your effort like this. I'm sure you're worried about Yuichi, but he would never abandon you at this most important time. Whatever Shohei tells you, you need to believe what Yuichi said. Right?"

Wataru couldn't answer.

"I don't really know what you two are talking about right now. But it's really hard for me to see you worrying over the same thing. I *can't* keep reassuring you and then turn you over to Yuichi forever. That's why I can't be here right now."

He said the word "can't" with extra force, looking straight at Wataru. His eyes were filled with an earnest plea that was enough to calm Wataru's flustered heart.

"A-Asaka—"

"I'm sorry for speaking out of turn. But I want you to pass your exams just as much as Yuichi does. I don't want to see you looking depressed."

At last the gloom faded from his eyes and Masanobu smiled encouragingly at Wataru, who was still stunned.

"Good luck. I can't help you with this...me or Yuichi. You have to do it on your own. Don't get too distracted, and look ahead. You only have one more month."

"I will."

Suffused by a powerful emotion, Wataru nodded firmly. He was mortified at himself for being disturbed by trivial things and never maturing. Masanobu showered him with such unchanging affection, Wataru didn't want to disappoint him with pathetic behavior anymore.

He's right. There's something I need to do right now.

Wataru didn't want to run from the fact that Masanobu had given him his heart, just like he could run from his unfading love for Yuichi. He was fiercely aware that he had to become a stronger, deeper human being.

"Hold on, Masanobu. I'm ready to go, too. We can go out together."

"Shohei—"

Shohei called quickly to Masanobu, who was heading out the door. As they turned to go, Wataru stood up tall and declared, "I'm going to pass!"

"Uh?" The abrupt statement caught Shohei off guard and he made a face.

But Wataru went on, ignoring him.

"I'm going to get into the school I want and realize the future I want with my own effort. I'm going to work hard to become a man worthy of living with Yuichi."

Shohei remained silent.

"So no matter what schemes you come up with, it won't shake me anymore. Until the day comes that Yuichi tells me he doesn't need me anymore—No, even if that day doesn't come, my feelings won't change."

The weight of his crisp declaration made not only Shohei, but Masanobu gape as well. They were so flabbergasted by Wataru's mature expression that they forgot to blink.

"When you told us that we had made an enemy of you, Shohei, I felt cornered. But really, I was excited. I thought if you ever acknowledged me, that would be the happiest day of my life. I don't think that goal is completely hopeless, either. Yuichi hates to lose, so the more opposition he faces, the better man he'll become. I'll refuse to surrender, too."

"Great," Shohei said. "Masanobu. I can't do it. I can't deal with all this impassioned speech-making. I'll retreat for today."

Shohei swiftly withdrew, his body bent.

After watching him leave, Masanobu glanced over and met Wataru's eyes.

"Wataru—That was really cool," he laughed brightly, and then waved goodbye.

"And, and—" Takako said, moving her little

mouth earnestly. "Puru is sick. He's in the hospital and I can't see him for one more week."

"Oh really? You must be lonely, huh, Takako?"

"I'm okay! But poor Puru."

As she answered, teardrops glistened in her surprisingly large eyes. Takako tried to stop her tears with her hand and roughly smeared her cheeks. Wataru hurriedly searched the pockets of his pants and jacket for something to wipe her face with, but unfortunately, he wasn't in the habit of carrying a handkerchief. He fumbled for something to do when suddenly a shadow passed over his head and a white handkerchief was held out in front of his eyes.

"Why don't you use this?"

"Huh?"

"It's all right, I didn't get splashed *that* badly."

An exquisite voice came to Wataru's ears, somewhat quiet and filled with a faint sensuality, overlaying the familiar words. They had been the first words Wataru had exchanged with Yuichi.

Wataru had been washing his face at a drinking fountain in their high school and had splashed Yuichi, who stood beside him. Yuichi had loaned Wataru his handkerchief, and it had been the beginning of a small miracle. Wataru never thought he would fall in love with the beautiful honor student who was the subject of everyone's gossip.

"Kazuki-What are you—?"

"What makes you need to say my name whenever you see me? Idiot."

"You're one to talk! Calling people names

whenever you see them.”

The familiar sound of Yuichi's teasing finally brought Wataru back to his senses. But even when he saw Yuichi smirking and sitting down on the floor beside him, he still couldn't quite believe it.

Shohei had picked Wataru up late in the afternoon and brought him to visit Takako as he had promised he would the day before. Wataru's heart ached to see her eyes puffy with crying, but her mother Kirie had joyfully told him that she looked much more cheerful than usual, so he was relieved his visit was doing some good.

I was wondering what I would do if she started crying, but I suppose I don't need to worry.

Takako wasn't surprised when Yuichi appeared and she let him wipe her face with his handkerchief. Wataru found himself chuckling despite himself. Perhaps she had known that her uncle would be coming. She let this magnificent prince help her, and Wataru enjoyed thinking ahead to the future and what a perfect young lady she would become, but he was also a little scared by it.

“I didn't know you were coming, Kazuki. Shohei didn't say a word.”

“He probably doesn't want to owe you anything. He called me suddenly yesterday and forced me to come over. But if he'd told me you were coming, I would have come sooner. Being forced to come over to my brother's house must have felt like fighting the last boss without any equipment, huh?”

“It wasn't *that* bad...”

“What's a lasbost?” Takako asked Yuichi,

mystified. Her tears had dried completely. "Did you come here to fight a lasbost?"

"Yeah. He's the absolute worst guy ever. Your daddy is our last boss. Understand?" Yuichi asked.

"Daddy is the worst ever? The worst person in the whole world?"

After her innocent, shocked question, Yuichi could no longer hold back and he burst out laughing. He was talking about the father she adored, and Takako pouted furiously, clinging tightly to Wataru.

"I hate you, Uncle Yuichi! My daddy's not bad!"

"Takako—"

"Right, Mister Wataru? My daddy is cool, right?"

"Uh, well—"

Cornered, Wataru fumbled for an answer. Certainly, from an objective point of view, Shohei was quite a magnificent man. He had handsome, masculine features and a powerful style unlike that of most Japanese people. His sophisticated aura was exquisitely spiced up by an adult charm and boldness. The first time Wataru had seen him, he had felt a strange admiration for him just because he was Kazuki's older brother.

"Well, he's not...*not* cool, I guess. What do you think, Kazuki?"

"Listen to me, Takako. You and your mother are under your father's evil spell. So you can't tell how evil he really is."

"Evil?"

"Hey, are you brainwashing my daughter?" Shohei asked. They hadn't seen him come in, but Shohei was leaning against an open door frame, his arms

crossed over his chest, gazing down at them glumly. He had changed from his designer suit into a casual, light cashmere knit and pants, but with Shohei wearing them, they still looked refined.

"Daddy, are you a lasbost? Are you a bad guy?" Takako asked, padding over to him. Shohei lifted her affectionately into his arms. He held his daughter in his right arm and turned to the little girl that clung to his neck. He smiled gently.

"Don't be silly, Takako. Only the very best person can be the last boss."

"Then I want Mister Wataru to be it."

"What?!" Wataru cried out. His face froze at suddenly being named last boss. Yuichi and Shohei both turned to stare at him in unison and, exposed to their frigid gazes, Wataru felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Geez. So she settles on you in the end. Daughters are so cruel," Shohei sighed theatrically and looked at Wataru once more with a ceremonial posture. "I'm really sorry about putting you out today. Thank you, Wataru."

"Oh, it's fine."

Wataru felt himself getting further off balance when Shohei thanked him so seriously. Wataru bowed meekly and then drained the tea Kirie had given him earlier.

"It looks like Kirie is reassured as well, now that Takako has cheered up. It's been a while since we've seen her smile. We're grateful to you."

"Heh. You'd still do anything she asked, huh?" Yuichi asked.

"Are you really obligated to talk like that about

others? I created this little set-up to give you a chance to see your dark-eyed boy. Why don't you try saying 'thank you, brother' instead?"

"Why would I say that? Creep."

"Um—" Wataru timidly broke into the conversation in Yuichi's place, since Yuichi was getting annoyed. "I've been wondering about this since yesterday, but...why do you call me 'dark-eyed boy'?"

"Hmm?"

"You're referring to me, right? Please don't give me such strange nicknames."

"Darkai boy!" Takako parroted from her father's arms, her eyes shining. Apparently she liked the way the words sounded because she shrieked in laughter. Seeing her face, Wataru could no longer press his complaint.

"Well then, why don't I leave you alone for a while? Wataru, you have something you want to ask Yuichi, right?"

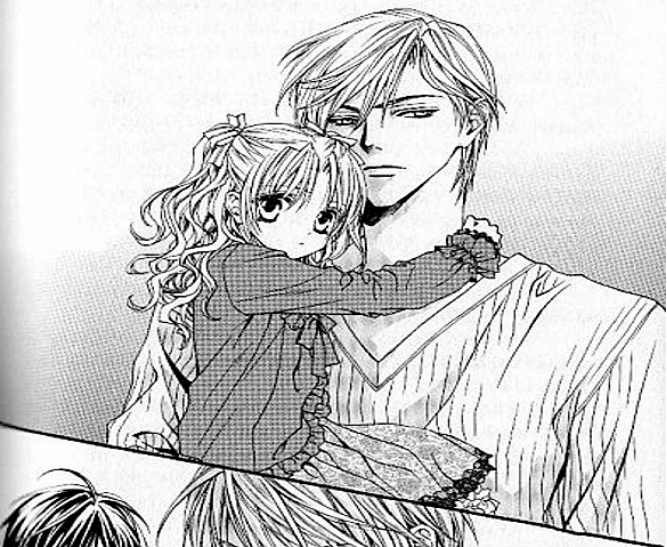
"Shohei—"

"Our conversation yesterday was interrupted, after all. And I think it's best to hear it directly from Yuichi, anyway. I talked to him last night and he got so serious and told me not to butt in. But I didn't exactly lie."

"Don't make such lame excuses, brother. You want us to break up."

Shohei slowly set his daughter down and Yuichi locked onto him with a thorny glare. This happened all the time but, perhaps because of the familiarity between the brothers, it was interesting that Yuichi's speech became slightly more childish.

So Kazuki heard about yesterday from Shohei...



They had joked about Shohei being the last boss, but Shohei wasn't the one they needed to fight: it was the anxiety that one of them was hiding his feelings. Wataru had intended to ignore it at first, but if Yuichi would tell him the truth.

It'll be fine. Whatever it's about, I'll believe Kazuki and hear him out calmly.

Wataru felt weak for a moment, but something glittered at the corner of his eye. It was the silver ring Yuichi wore on his ring finger. He had put it on because he was coming to see Wataru.

"Kazuki—"

"What is it? What's wrong, Wataru?"

"Mine is in my wallet...I didn't know you were coming."

Yuichi looked briefly confused, but he quickly realized what Wataru meant. He knew that Wataru didn't wear the ring during the day and that he put it into his wallet when he went out. He had even teased him about it, telling him that it wasn't a good luck charm.

"I can't believe you're so worked up over something like that. You're such a simple guy," Yuichi said.

"It just caught me by surprise."

"Idiot."

Yuichi ruffled Wataru's hair with his left hand and smiled with gentle eyes. Takako clutched tightly to Wataru's right arm, as if their intimacy had ignited her rivalry.

"You're quite the playboy, Wataru," Shohei said, his arms folded over his chest once more. His voice

sounded either cynical or sarcastic.

"Well then, I'll leave Takako with you two and go get some tea with Kirie. Oh, that reminds me. Yuichi?"

"What do you want?"

"Did you get your passport ready? It's only valid for another six months, right? It would be too bad if you had to turn around once you got to the airport."

"Shohei!"

Yuichi's color drained from his face and he glared at his older brother sharply. But Shohei looked unperturbed and turned to look at Wataru.

Passport? He did just say that, didn't he? Kazuki really is...

The card that had bothered Wataru had been from New York and Yuichi had been hinting that he might be going somewhere. But that one word, "passport," gave Wataru more of a shock than he had expected. His anxiety was suddenly given an air of credibility and he lost all ability to control his facial expressions.

"See how his eyes are trembling with confusion?" Shohei said. *"The more you torment him, the more he looks like Mizuho. Don't you think?"* Great big black eyes in a little face. A strong will and an almost impudent expression. And then there's—"

"Enough already! You can leave now," Yuichi said.

Yuichi didn't want Wataru troubled unnecessarily, so he drove Shohei from the room coldly, his voice struggling to hold back his anger. Shohei seemed to feel that he had sown the seeds of doubt well enough, and he left the room obediently, without any resistance.

"The more you torment him, the more he looks like Mizuho. Don't you think?"

Shohei had once said something similar, and afterwards, in bed, Yuichi had flatly denied it. *"There's no one like you anywhere in this world,"* he had asserted at the time, without a hint of a lie in his words.

That's right. Because I trust Kazuki. I would never take a twisted or cynical view of the truth out of jealousy. If I'm always like that, I'll never be Kazuki's equal. And besides—

An image of Masanobu from the day before ran through Wataru's mind. If Yuichi caused him distress, he knew that Masanobu would reach out to help. If Yuichi hurt him, Masanobu would try to heal the injury, and when Wataru felt alone, Masanobu would watch over him. That kindness would save him, but Masanobu's affection was also a symbol of Wataru's weakness. The only way he could make up the distance between them was to put his feet firmly on the ground and look straight at Yuichi.

"Wataru—"

Yuichi must have sensed something in Wataru's face as it grew harsher. He called Wataru's name politely and then, after winking at Takako to keep her still, he began to speak quietly.

"You remember I told you that you were my first lover, strictly speaking?"

"O-of course I do!"

Takako didn't understand what they were talking about, but Yuichi hurried on to the rest of the story. There was no way Wataru would have forgotten the first day

they had slept together. It was almost a year and a half ago, but Wataru remembered the early autumn, when he had made love in Yuichi's room for the first time.

"It really bothered you, didn't it, Wataru? I remember perfectly, too, how I told you that I would explain when the time came, and I meant it."

"Kazuki—"

"I think you've already figured this out, but the name my brother mentioned just now, Mizuho—She's the girl who sent me the Christmas card. She's four years younger than Shohei and at the time, she was the girl of my dreams."

Hearing those words stated so frankly sent a sharp thrill to Wataru's heart. But since Yuichi's heart ached much worse telling him this, Wataru felt that his own pain was nothing. Yuichi was forced to reveal a history that he would have rather kept hidden. Deep in his heart, Wataru apologized to Yuichi for his selfishness—he could not tell him to stop, even though he knew how he must feel.

"She was beautiful, but she wasn't stuck-up about it. She had big black eyes that were very memorable. Her emotions came right onto her face, so my brother teased her all the time. I thought she was so cute when she looked defiant or competitive, even though she was older than me. I can't even count how many girlfriends my brother has had, but aside from Kirie, I think Mizuho was the most charming."

Wataru was silent.

"The one thing I want you to understand is that she is completely different from you. I swear, Wataru,

I've never once seen her in you or compared the two of you. I'd actually forgotten all about that until Shohei said something."

"It's all right, Kazuki."

It was a little hard to pull off, but somehow Wataru answered with a smile. The only thing he could do right now was dispel some of Yuichi's anxiety.

"I'm not worried about that at all," Wataru said. "I told you, I believe everything you tell me. I didn't say that to trick you. I really meant it."

"Wataru—"

"To be honest, my heart is pounding. But it's fine. I'm not that weak."

Good. That time the smile seemed better. Wataru looked at Yuichi's relieved face, and the tension slipped out of his shoulders, too.

"I think my brother only told you that you looked like her to have some fun. If he really thought you looked like her, he would have a subtler attitude toward you, right? Anyway, she's his ex-girlfriend. If we go with that logic—"

"Huh?"

"Then maybe Asaka is the one who's more dangerous. For him, it's not the looks, but the way you act that makes people love you. That's what made him remember his dead girlfriend. By loving you, he's burying himself in the past. I'm not denying that he sees you for yourself, too, but...I think the pain from losing someone he loved fuels his feelings for you."

Wataru had no idea how to respond, so he simply gazed at Yuichi. Although Yuichi felt hostile toward

Masanobu, he was not entirely unsympathetic to his rival in love. It could only be because Yuichi understood for the pain Masanobu carried. He would have been exactly like him if he hadn't won Wataru. That's was why he had spoken to him so earnestly before.

"Kazuki, I—"

"Sorry, I got a little off-topic."

Wataru opened his mouth, feeling that he had to say something, but Yuichi changed his expression instantly and smiled.

"Anyway, Mizuho is sort of like my first love."

"Your—"

"Are you all right so far? Do you want me to stop?" Yuichi asked even more gently as Wataru's face clouded over. But his senses were piqued: what came next would be critical. Wataru shook his head firmly from side to side.

"I'm fine. I want to hear the whole story. I mean, it's in the past, right? It would be stranger if you hadn't liked anyone else before me. Even I've dated some girls before, though I wasn't really serious about any of them."

"I remember. Your girlfriend wanted matching rings back when they were so popular at school, but you refused. And that started a fight and you two broke up. You weren't even together two months, were you?"

"H-how do you know that?!" Wataru asked, turning red.

A suggestive smile curved Yuichi's lips. Wataru had only gone out with her briefly, but the cause of their break-up, that he was a guy who didn't want matching

rings, spread quickly. At the time, everyone at school had been into wearing rings, but Wataru had never imagined the story would have reached Yuichi, who was in a different grade.

"Of course I know about it. When you lost your ring, I was the person who brought it back to you. I felt it was my responsibility to keep track of what happened after that."

"Don't be so condescending."

"Maybe, but I'm also thirsty. Takako, would you go get us a glass of water?"

Suddenly changing the subject, Yuichi shrewdly turned to Takako, who still occupied Wataru's lap. She had been holding herself back from interrupting all this time and she seemed thrilled to be given something to do. She ran eagerly from the room.

Yuichi took a deep breath, reassuming his serious expression as he murmured, "I don't really want Takako to hear this next part."

Wataru quickly braced himself and waited for the story to continue.

"Mizuho treated me like a baby brother, but unfortunately she and my brother broke up after less than a year. My brother has mellowed since then, but at the time he was more...intense, so I think it was hard for her to keep seeing him. I don't know the exact reason they broke up, but I heard later that it was Mizuho who suggested it."

"I see."

"I'd been out of touch with her since then. But the autumn of my last year in middle school, I saw her again

somewhere I never expected.”

“Somewhere you...never expected?”

“She was sick.”

That single, short word was tinged with bitter emotion. Wataru was struck speechless, so all he could do was stay silent.

“I saw her in the admissions ward of a big municipal hospital. A friend of mine had gotten surgery for his appendix, and as I was leaving after visiting him, she called to me in the hallway. She’d seemed so healthy before, but she had heart problems for a little while and her condition had worsened. I wanted to help her, so I visited the hospital diligently. Even after Mizuho was discharged, I made as much time for her as I could. My brother had just left to go abroad and we never heard from him, so at first I felt like I was standing in for him. I didn’t believe that she’d broken up with my brother because she didn’t like him.

“But I was still a kid and I couldn’t differentiate between my sense of duty and my old adoration. I was grateful for her illness because she tried to close the distance with me and gradually she relaxed and started treating me the same as before, which made me happy when I think about it now. But it might be hard to call that love. At the time, I was devoted to her and I didn’t have time to think rationally. Her condition wouldn’t stabilize and she was constantly in and out of hospitals.”

“Kazuki—”

Wataru could imagine how Yuichi had been then. He acted arrogant with Wataru, but really, he was very kind and had a stronger sense of responsibility than

anyone Wataru knew. If he were reunited with the girl he had adored and discovered that she had heart problems, it was natural that he would try to help her as much as he could.

And then, after she had been weakened by her fight with disease, there was no way her heart could remain unmoved by the young man who was earnestly exhausting himself for her. Especially if he was the younger brother of someone she'd loved.

But Kazuki was finishing middle school at the time. If she was eight years older, that makes her twenty-three. That's a pairing straight out of a soap opera. Though I'm sure, considering it was Kazuki, he was very mature...

Maybe, like Yuichi said, that hadn't been love. But their emotional bond and the desire to seek each other out was certainly related to love. It hurt to admit that, but Wataru fought back the pain in his heart to say something.

"So this...Mizuho is in New York now?"

"She's there for treatment. Her doctor suggested a doctor there who's researching her disease. At first she didn't know what she wanted to do, but when I was visiting her once, she had a major attack and that seemed to help her decide. She said she didn't want to cause me any more trouble. I was getting ready for my high school entrance exams and I'm sure she was in a difficult position. In the end, six months after we were reunited, she moved to America for treatment. We've been apart ever since."

"But why? Couldn't you have worked out the distance?"

"Before she went to New York, we had a talk. We had never been united by feelings of love. Mizuho still had feelings for my brother. And I wasn't strong enough to keep loving her from afar. She was buried under anxiety and loneliness, and I was freed from my adoration and the obsession I'd had about my brother for so long. That was what brought us together."

"That can't be—"

Yuichi told the story calmly, but how great had the chaos inside him been before he'd reached this conclusion? Whatever the motivation, this girl was someone he'd once loved and to whom he'd devoted his heart. If it could be explained so easily by logic, nobody would ever agonize over love. As these thoughts went through Wataru's mind, an intent expression on his face, Yuichi murmured in a relaxed tone, "You're so kind. Sometimes I imagine talking with you about what a great person you'll be in five or ten years. It's not just that I love you that makes me so weak against you, you know. The most important thing is to always focus on that and keep working to look ahead. Your feelings aren't clouded by anything, so they always come out in your face...and when I'm with you, I think, 'I don't want to be unworthy of him.'"

"You don't want to be unworthy...of *me*?"

"That's right. We're both men, so I don't want to become someone who's beneath you. I feel it right now. If I were in your position, Wataru, I wouldn't be able to listen to stories about your past that calmly. And then to actually feel sorry for what happened to us it's... incredible."

Yuichi laughed uncomfortably after saying this. In contrast, Wataru was bewildered by the idea that what he was doing was so bizarre. It was frankly unbelievable that Yuichi was telling him with a straight face that he didn't want to be unworthy of him.

"Hey, Wataru—"

"Hm?"

"Now you understand why I was so indirect and said 'strictly speaking,' don't you?" Yuichi asked, sounding awkward, but Wataru nodded deeply and looked at him.

"Yeah. Actually, now that you ask, I'd had a feeling about it."

"Well, that's what it was."

"But it was careless of you to say something unintentionally at a time like that."

Wataru couldn't be *too* understanding, so he glowered at Kazuki just a little. Yuichi's eyes widened momentarily in surprise, but he quickly recognized his fault and apologized. The reaction was unusually fast for someone as stubborn as him.

"Strictly speaking, this is the first time I've ever slept with anyone, too."

Those were the words Kazuki had murmured, almost to himself, after they had slept together for the first time. Perhaps Yuichi had been hesitant to sleep with Wataru until the very last moment because he remembered Mizuho's body. Wataru suspected that Yuichi had been concerned about the burden it would place on her heart or that it might worsen her condition, and been completely unable to advance. Such things

wouldn't have stopped most fifteen year-olds, but Wataru knew that Yuichi would have put the other person's situation first, even if he had to smother his own desires.

That's right—The Kazuki I know is always thinking about other people. He even understood Asaka, though I thought he hated him.

Wataru could see that better than anyone, after all the times Yuichi had made love to him. Wataru had been knocked over by the collision of their feelings before, but Yuichi had still been gentle. No matter how excited Kazuki became, when he touched Wataru, his fingers always approached gingerly, as if he were straining slightly. Wataru loved that delicate act more than anything.

"Wataru—Hey, are you sure you're all right?"

Wataru was silent for so long that Yuichi asked the same question again with worry in his eyes. *He doesn't trust me at all*, Wataru thought with a smirk, then pulled together as much of a smile as his emotions would allow.

"All right, I'll be honest. If I said I was fine, that would be a lie. But that probably won't last. Thank you for telling me this, Kazuki."

"Wataru—"

"But there's one other thing that's been bothering me. What did Shohei mean when he mentioned your passport before? Are you going abroad?"

"That was—My brother just said that for no reason..."

Yuichi faltered uncomfortably, but his posture

looked as if he'd been expecting this. Maybe this was the last secret, Wataru thought with a jolt. He let the controlled pounding of his heart pass with a blank expression and waited for the heavy doors to open.

"That night we went to the temple for New Year's—"

"What?"

"I'll never lie to you." Remember I told you that?"

Wataru wondered why Kazuki brought that up so abruptly, but he nodded anyway. Yuichi had confessed that Shohei's ex-girlfriend had sent him the card. But Wataru remembered that Yuichi had vowed there was nothing more to their relationship.

"I'm sorry, but that night, I just couldn't tell you that I had been there with her before. You were facing your entrance exams and I didn't want to worry you over something stupid. But all the cards she's sent me so far have been innocent seasonal greetings. I've contact with her and I never thought about going to visit her. I told you I never once sent a reply, and that's the truth."

"I don't really mind about that, it's—"

"But there's something I didn't tell you. I...actually got a second card, a little while after the first one."

"You did?"

Wataru was stunned by this unexpected revelation. Yuichi let out a small sigh and flicked his gaze over to the door Takako had gone through.

"She doesn't know my current address and the card came to my parents' house, like every other year. I guess my brother saw it first, since he goes over there

sometimes. He acted totally innocent and didn't say anything, but then on New Year's Eve he sent me a suspicious text message."

"New Year's Eve? You mean, the night of our date?"

Wataru's memory traced back instantly to Yuichi staring intently at his cell phone in front of the train station.

"I thought it was strange at the time. You don't like cell phones very much, but you were looking at something so intently. Was that the message from Shohei?"

"My brother found out that Mizuho and I had been seeing each other, so he was probably surprised that we were still in touch. After that, he looked into what she was doing and found out that she'd gone to New York for treatment and that she was about to undergo serious surgery. He asked me what I was planning to do about it and he did it right before I was meeting you. I told my parents I was going out, so he must have figured it out. He was probably hoping that it would make things awkward if I saw you while I felt guilty."

"Oh come on...are you sure you're not overthinking this?"

"He knew that if he called me, I just wouldn't pick up, so he sent a text message instead. Look, Wataru, everything that man does is for a reason. Don't ever underestimate him."

Yuichi said this with such an intense expression that the force of it made Wataru agree despite himself. Given what had happened up until now, it wasn't an

unreasonable conclusion.

"So what about this second card I didn't see? Is Mizuho getting her surgery?"

"Apparently. She had one surgery in Japan and one in New York, but those were only to keep her condition under control. She wrote to tell me that she was finally next in line for a heart transplant. If that's successful, she'll be able to live a normal life. That's what the card said."

"Come on, Kazuki."

"What?"

"Don't treat me like I'm stupid. That's not really all it said, is it?" Wataru pressed Yuichi with a sharp gaze, feeling a little annoyed. "If it was just an announcement, Shohei wouldn't have sent you a text message about it or mentioned your passport. Tell me the truth, Kazuki. All of it."

"Wataru—"

Considering how Shohei had behaved, the second card must have had something much more important written on it. Wataru fixed his large black eyes on Yuichi, and a particularly deep sigh finally escaped his lips, as if to say that he surrendered.

"I got my passport when I traveled with my family before. It has nothing to do with what's going on; I'm not going anywhere. So don't worry about anything unusual, Wataru, and please just focus on your exams."

"Kazuki—"

"There's a good chance the surgery will be successful, but of course there's always a chance something could go wrong. So she asked if she could

see me before the surgery...she said there were a lot of things she wanted to tell me, face-to-face. That's what it said. But I'm not planning to go," Yuichi declared flatly, not allowing the slightest chance for interruption.

"If I went, there's nothing I could do for her. Instead, I would just be pulling her back to the past when she should be turning toward the future. I don't know why Mizuho wrote those things, but I think it's the best for both of us if I don't go."

"But Kazuki—"

"Obviously I'm hoping her surgery is a success. But no matter how cold-hearted people say I am, you're the only one who matters to me now. And you're facing a major event in your life, too. How could I leave you alone at a time like this? So don't worry. My association with Mizuho is totally over."

Wataru was silent.

"And it isn't like she came right out and said 'I want to see you.' She's probably just feeling emotional now that this major surgery has been set. That's natural. I can't go see her, but I wrote her a letter. That was all I *could* do. I explained that to my brother, too. But I wonder what he's plotting."

If Yuichi was speaking from the heart, Wataru had no right to object. If Yuichi had said he wanted to go see her, Wataru *would* have been hurt and that would have made him more anxious and kept him from focusing on studies. It may have all been in the past, but listening to the story Wataru could tell how much Yuichi still cared for her, so his feelings were even more complicated.

"Wataru, don't look at me like that," Yuichi said

in a light, gentle voice in response to Wataru's pathetic expression.

"I know exactly what you're thinking. And I can imagine how much courage it took for her to write that second card. But I don't want to leave you."

"But—Really—"

"Anyway, I don't want to be so wrapped up in the past that it hurts you. If she started to expect something because I came to see her, that would be even more cruel for her. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes."

Wataru didn't nod and offer a perky "Good point!", but what Yuichi said was reasonable, so Wataru backed down reluctantly. It was his own selfishness that didn't want Yuichi to go, but it felt like coming to that conclusion didn't matter, so he didn't feel relieved.

Kazuki explained his behavior to me, but I'm not happy about his decision. Mizuho must be so scared with this life-threatening illness. Come on, Kazuki. Are you really okay with this? If something happened to Mizuho, can you really tell me you wouldn't regret staying here?

Wataru was afraid that Yuichi might regret it later. If only he could say "Go to New York" and send Yuichi off, Yuichi might be able to reveal how he really felt without having to worry. Wataru knew that, but he just couldn't say it.

"Don't worry about it, Wataru."

Concerned by Wataru's glum expression, Yuichi smiled, his tone as imperious as it had ever been.

"I'm not hiding anything now. I told you everything there is to tell."

"Kazuki—"

"I feel horrible that we had to talk about this at such a bad time. I can't control what you do, but try to concentrate on your exams now. I'll always be there for you and I'll do what I can to keep you from worrying. So please—"

"Thanks. But don't worry so much about me. If I got upset about this, that would be exactly what Shohei wanted. And I'm tired of always looking immature."

Shohei was always testing them to make them strong enough to walk beside each other through it all. He wanted to see how deep their trust and love for each other could grow without shattering. They wouldn't be spared the critical looks and slander of an uncomprehending world. Their relationship made that a fact, and at some point they would need that strength.

"Takako sure is taking a long time."

Since no resolution sprang to mind despite brooding on it, Wataru changed the subject to try and lighten his mood. It had been more than twenty minutes since Takako had gone to get water. Wataru turned to look inquisitively at Yuichi, wondering what could have happened, when suddenly Yuichi's lips approached.

"H-hey!" Wataru exclaimed.

"Now's our chance."

Yuichi kissed Wataru nimbly, ignoring his protest shamelessly.

Oh, that's right, Wataru thought, noticing it for the first time. Kazuki is anxious, too. Just as much as I am, really. He's the one suffering most of all, caught between Mizuho's surgery and my exams. But he still not to

hesitate when he's with me. That's the kind of guy he is.

Wataru was such a clown, compared to Yuichi. He slowly closed his eyes, feeling a faint self-loathing in his heart.

"Well? Did you and Yuichi talk to your little hearts' content?" Shohei asked with a grin from the driver's seat as he took Wataru back home. His profile showed no trace of suggestiveness; he looked concerned about how things had gone between the two of them.

"Thanks to you, Kazuki explained everything that was bothering me. Um, Shohei—"

"Hm?"

"Aren't you worried about Mizuho? You used to go out with her, right?"

"Of course I'm worried."

Shohei acknowledged it so nonchalantly that Wataru was the one who became flustered. But Shohei only continued, "But I've already decided what's most important. I suspect Yuichi said something similar? What's most important to me is family; I have no time for anything else. Yuichi and I aren't like we used to be, but time has stopped for Mizuho because of her illness. If we only partially care about her, that would darken her bright future. A fleeting kindness is nothing more than a fraud. Oh—look at me, rambling away. Sorry, can I let you out here?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you very much."

Shohei stopped the car at the corner of Wataru's street and then murmured, as if to himself, "Masanobu

and Mizuho have that in common. In the end, they're the only ones who can make time move forward. If they cling to other people, they'll never manage it. Or did you do something to him, Wataru?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that as we were leaving your house yesterday, Masanobu was acting strange. He was brooding about something and then he came out with this ridiculous question, asking me if I'd be angry if he didn't accept the job offer."

"He what?!"

"Well, I think he was just asking rhetorically. Because I gave him a kick and told him not to ask stupid questions."

From what Shohei said, Wataru didn't think he could judge whether Masanobu had been joking or had asked seriously. Wataru gave a rueful smile and thanked him, and then unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed out of the car. The sun had begun to sink and a crescent moon was visible in the sky. The chill of the blowing wind was much harsher than when Wataru had left.

"Sorry, but I'm going to borrow Yuichi a little longer. When you two leave, Takako fusses again."

"No, I should thank you. You kept Takako busy, didn't you? It took thirty minutes for her to come back after Yuichi asked her to get some water. It's like someone wanted us to have time to talk."

"I...didn't do that for you two, exactly. You were probably talking about things I didn't want my young daughter hearing. Just hearing the words 'sick' and 'surgery' would terrify her, what with Puru's situation."

Shohei looked at Wataru disinterestedly, as if he hadn't wanted to reveal it so easily. He knew that Yuichi had sent Takako from the room and he must have guessed at the shape their discussion was taking. *That was impressive teamwork*, Wataru thought, oddly moved.

Shohei's car pulled away and the tension finally slipped from Wataru's shoulders. It had been only half a day, but he felt like the time he'd been through had been densely packed. Learning about Yuichi's past and his "strictly speaking" girlfriend, things that had been straining his heart for a long time had all been resolved in one swoop. But the fact that he couldn't feel upbeat despite that was because he was still worried about Mizuho's illness.

I wonder if Kazuki really won't visit her? Is it okay for me to be happy about that?

Shohei had said he had "decided what's most important." Yuichi was also holding back for similar reasons. What they said was true, and Wataru understood that it would be bad to get carried away by sentimentality.

But if I were Mizuho...

"Wata-a-arū, what're you doing out here?"

"K-Karin? Don't surprise me like that!"

Wataru's heart had leapt into his throat when she suddenly jumped out behind him. When he spun around, all she said was "welcome back" with an innocent puff of white air. Wataru felt like he'd finally returned to his familiar, old life and even his face relaxed all on its own.

"It was nice of you to go right in the middle of studying for your exams. But since Kazuki's older brother asked you, you couldn't exactly refuse, huh? Oh, there's some pork soup on the stove. If you're hungry, you should have some."

"Where are you going at a time like this?"

"To get some ice cream! And marble cherry candy! You totally forgot about it last time, you know!"

"Oh, I—"

"The heat is on really high and my throat felt dry, so I decided to go to the store and buy some. And then I just happened to see you getting out of a black station wagon. It looked so awesome."

"It's a new Saab. It must have cost fifty thousand dollars."

"Whoa!"

It seemed like a lot to them, since their father drove a domestic car. Karin paled for a second, and then muttered in fatigue, "It really is like living in two different worlds."

She stood up straight again instantly and turned to stare at Wataru with an unusually serious expression.

"Oh, but listen to this, Wataru. Um—"

"What is it?"

"You can do it!"

Karin balled up both her fists and pumped them in the air, suddenly full of spirit. As far as Wataru could tell, when Karin had realized that they "lived in two different worlds," she must have seen Wataru's depressed face and gotten the wrong idea. Seeing his little sister cheering so hard for him, forced a laugh out

of Wataru despite himself. He earned himself a glare, but he felt much better.

Karin waved enthusiastically and ran off. As he watched her slight frame recede, Wataru whispered, "Thank you."

"You've got a cute sister."

"You—"

Wataru spun around in surprise at the voice that spoke so freely to him. Masa'aki had appeared, coming around a corner from the direction of Wataru's house.

"What are you doing here?"

Masa'aki's older brother Masanobu was elegant and well-dressed, the type to dress simply in a shirt and pants, but the younger brother Masa'aki had a frankly contradictory look: he wore jeans and a T-shirt that looked like he'd scoured a secondhand clothing shop for them, but he also had on a leather jacket with fur on the collar. But still, perhaps because his features resembled Masanobu's, he still looked impressive.

"I just went to your house, but no one answered the door. And I rang the bell a lot. I decided I might as well go home. It's weird that your parents aren't home, even though it's the weekend."

"My parents are both busy, so—wait, I don't need to explain myself to you! How did you find my house, anyway? Did Masanobu tell you?"

"Masanobu has your address stored in his cell phone," Masa'aki answered breezily, but that meant he had purposely looked for it. Wataru couldn't grasp how Masa'aki could be so calm after doing something like that, no matter how well the brothers got along. Wataru

stared back in astonishment as Masa'aki strode over, looking annoyed.

"How's your studying going? You seem to have a lot of free time, considering how frantic you were before. Did you go somewhere?"

The boy stood in front of Wataru, bluntly provoking him.

"My brother spared some of his precious time to look over your work, right? He won't stop even when you're wrong."

"If that's your opinion, why don't you stop bothering me? Sorry, but I can't stand being around you."

"Hmph. I was just going to offer to tutor you, if you didn't mind me. Even my brother can't match me in English and math. You want to get into an engineering department, right?"

"Thanks, but no thanks." Wataru couldn't stand to talk to Masa'aki any longer, so he spoke coldly and started to walk away. But Masa'aki called out unthinkable words behind him.

"I didn't know about this, but you're dating a man, right?"

"What did you—"

"And your boyfriend is that Kazuki guy? When I saw you guys at the temple, I didn't notice at all. You're really good at fooling people. Although I was suspicious that my brother and Kazuki cared so much. You couldn't be any ordinary underclassman. But I never thought you guys were together."

Wataru had come to a stop as Masa'aki thought out loud, mercilessly. It didn't sound like he was making

fun of Wataru, but it was clear that he was excited at finding out a secret.

"How did you—who told you—?"

"Oh-ho, so you're not going to deny it?"

"...No, I'm not," Wataru said after biting his tongue. If he lied now, it would be pathetic. Since Wataru had just witnessed Yuichi's grace, he steeled himself and confirmed Masa'aki's suspicions.

"I am going out with Kazuki. My sister, who you just saw, knows about it, too. We don't go around broadcasting it, but there are other people who understand us, too. Masanobu is one of those people."

"Shut up," Masa'aki said with derision, as if it somehow hurt him to hear his brother's name. A faint annoyance came over his cool features, and he scoffed loudly to try to hide it.

"A lot of my friends at college are gay, too," Masa'aki went on. "I don't discriminate. But I never thought I'd meet people like that in Japan. I mean, you look completely normal."

"What do you mean normal?"

"How can I put it? You don't look like the type of person who dates men."

Even when Masa'aki put it so bluntly, a fresh argument bubbled to the surface, demanding to know what kind of person dated men. But the thing that bothered Wataru even more than that was the question of why Masa'aki had come to his house in the first place. He'd seemed intrigued by Karin; maybe it would be best to try talking to him straight for once rather than just ignoring him.

"Look, I really don't have any time right now." Staring straight at his adversary, Wataru spoke in his coldest voice. "If you have something to say to me, I'll make time after my exams are over. So would you just leave now? You're staying in Japan until the end of next month, aren't you?"

"Masanobu won't come home."

"Huh?"

"Masanobu won't come home because of you. So I figured that if you're leading him on and forcing him to stay here, I wouldn't let you get away with it. I wanted to ask what your intentions were. I mean, really. You've got your boyfriend, Yuichi, don't you? So why are you—"

"H-hold on a second. You've got something seriously wrong here."

It was as if there were another Wataru Fujii, and Masa'aki had come to him claiming damages the other had caused. They had been talking at cross purposes the entire time, but Wataru had no idea what Masa'aki was saying to him now.

"You said he hasn't come home—Did Masanobu go out somewhere?"

Wataru checked the part that had bothered him the most first. If Masanobu had left home and not gone back, that in itself was cause for concern. But Wataru had seen Masanobu only yesterday and his behavior hadn't suggested anything out of the ordinary.

But Shohei did say he was acting strangely on their way home...

Masanobu couldn't have turned down the job as a joke. He was the leader of an architecture club, so

he was the sort of person who had a strong sense of responsibility. Plus, a job at Sette d'Oro would have been a step on the road to his dreams. He had certainly displayed an unusually emotional part of himself the other day, but even that had been in defense of Wataru.

"Or did you do something to him, Wataru?"

Shohei's words resurfaced unbidden in Wataru's mind. Shohei swore ignorance, but he couldn't declare total innocence because of Masanobu's unforgettable words: "That's why I can't be here right now."

Asaka—

That day, he had looked at Wataru as if he needed something from him. But Wataru still didn't understand what that was.

"What're you thinking about? You're off in your own little world," Masa'aki said, glowering. He didn't understand what his brother saw in Wataru. "Don't be so dumb, 'did he go out somewhere?' He's not a child—I wouldn't be this upset if that was all."

"Oh? But you seem pretty worked up, even for you."

"What did you say?!"

Wataru had spoken honestly, but Masa'aki bristled instantly. Wataru hadn't been mocking him though; he had only meant to suggest that this was how devoted Masa'aki was to his older brother. Plus, Wataru had a feeling that since Masa'aki was close to him, he knew the dangerous side of Masanobu that might show itself. He would know if there was something to worry about.

"Anyway," Masa'aki said, pulling himself back together, embarrassed to be provoked by someone

younger. "I'm not talking about anything that simple. I mean Masanobu isn't going to America. We'd talked about him coming once he graduated from college, but now he's suddenly talking about a job he found here."

"America? But that's—"

Since Wataru had just been at Shohei's house talking about whether or not Yuichi was going to take the job with Sette d'Oro, the timing caught him off-guard and he exclaimed stupidly, "Masanobu was planning to go to America?"

"That's what he promised me," Masa'aki said. "When my parents were transferred to New York, I went along. I didn't want to leave my brother, but he promised he would come because otherwise I wouldn't go. He told me to be strong for four years. He told me he would come study over there or look for work once he graduated. So I waited for him, but now he's suddenly talking about staying in Japan. Something must have happened, right?"

"But...Masanobu never said a word about that to me."

"Why do you have to deny it?!"

"I'm sorry," Wataru apologized meekly, since he understood how Masa'aki felt.

"A-anyway," Masa'aki continued. "That's why I'm here. I'm planning to get work in New York once I graduate, too, so if Masanobu comes then our family can be together again. We've already been away once; we lived in London when we were little. So we don't have any particular attachment to Japan. Plus, our parents are looking forward to seeing him. After all, my brother is a

good guy, unlike me. He's smart and kind to everybody, and even I can't find any fault with him. I've always been proud of him."

"You're a lot like him, you know. Anyone could tell by looking at you that you're brothers."

"I'm a lost cause. No matter what I do, I can't compare with him." Masa'aki denied Wataru's compliment flatly. Even though Masa'aki had acted rude and said whatever came to mind since they'd first met, Wataru had the feeling he was seeing an unexpected side of Masa'aki in this startling sensitivity.

"Did he tell a punk like you about Yuina?"

Before Wataru could get angry at the insult, his attention focused on the name "Yuina." Wataru nodded silently, and Masa'aki let out a long sigh.

"So he even told you that. He's really let his guard down around you, hasn't he?"

"That's Masanobu's girlfriend who...died. He said they were together from middle school until high school."

"Yeah. It was last summer that she got in the accident. She wasn't even that pretty, but she was warm-hearted and cute and they suited each other. When I heard that she'd dumped my brother, I came back to Japan just to get at her. I demanded to know what she didn't like about him."

"You did what?!"

"Come on, it's totally insane that she would dump Masanobu. But whatever. In any case, after Yuina died, Masanobu was depressed for a long time. He wouldn't answer the phone or reply to my e-mails, so I had to come to Japan to check on him. Whatever happened, he

looks happy again, as if nothing was wrong. But that accident put our family through a lot, and Masanobu only recovered because he felt like he couldn't worry us. So I don't think the actual damage has healed."

That sounded exactly like Masanobu, but of course his little brother saw through the act. Wataru couldn't deny that when he'd interacted with Masanobu as Yuichi's upperclassman, he had never imagined that he had a past like that.

"Hm...it feels like it's gotten colder," Masa'aki said to himself, lightening the mood between them that had gotten so emotional. Wataru wondered how long they'd been talking, but considering that Karin still hadn't come back from buying ice cream, it couldn't have been long. In that time, the area had been enveloped in faint shadows and the midwinter constellations shone clearly in the sky.

The sun is going to set soon, so it feels like we've been talking for hours.

That's how it seemed, but Wataru didn't think it was simply the fault of the sky. Somehow Wataru was beginning to not despise Masa'aki, who had picked fights and given Wataru nothing but a bad impression. He worshiped his brother with an openness Wataru was almost jealous of, and he was both shocked and envious of the freedom he used in how he acted.

"Why are you staring at me like that? You probably think you're better than me since my brother likes you so much. But I haven't given up yet. I'll win my brother over somehow and he'll come live with me again. You'll see."

"I don't really—I mean, this is the first I've heard about him going to America."

"Whatever—you wouldn't understand. You're the reason he decided to stay in Japan. He's been mentioning you for a while whenever I talk to him, so I've been on my guard to see what you're like. I never thought you'd affect his future, though."

"But I told you, I didn't know about it!"

Masa'aki was talking as if Wataru had seduced his brother. Wearily, Wataru tried his best to explain.

"Masanobu has helped me out, of course, but that's all it is."

"You're telling me it's nothing? You swear?"

"W-well, I—"

Wataru fumbled momentarily for an answer, and Masa'aki glared coldly at him.

"See?" Masa'aki said "We saw you and Kazuki on New Year's Eve. After that, Masanobu's face changed. He'd been totally quiet up until then, but then he was babbling. I can't explain it very well, but it was kind of sad and beautiful."

"Sad and...beautiful?"

"So I thought, what if? What if this guy Wataru Fujii wasn't just an underclassman my brother liked? I bugged him about it a lot until finally he broke down and told me that there was someone he liked and he couldn't take his eyes off of them. He said that was why he couldn't leave."

Wataru was speechless.

"But he said he didn't mean you. 'First of all, he's a boy,' he told me and laughed. Even though it was

obvious he was lying. I'm not doing this little brother act for nothing."

After he'd spit out these words, Masa'aki's eyes narrowed bitterly. When he'd found out that Masanobu had even gone to Wataru's house, it must have been obvious that Wataru was the "kid Masanobu liked."

"I give up. I can't believe he's in love with a man. If he'd gotten himself a new girlfriend, I wouldn't have said a word. I could have been happy for him. But a guy? And one who already had a boyfriend?"

"Who told you that? Who could have told you that Kazuki and I are together?" Wataru demanded harshly.

Masa'aki was clearly thrown off balance by the fierce tone of Wataru's question and he looked away. "Does it matter?"

But Wataru knew of only one person who could have known all this personal information and still pretend to be uninvolved. He had no idea when he had contacted Masa'aki, but there was no doubt that *he* was the one who'd spilled their secret.

It was Shohei. Because I made an enemy of him. As those words implied, Wataru now glimpsed Shohei's influence in every direction. He didn't know if Shohei was finally serious about breaking them up or if he was just enjoying the game, but Wataru couldn't imagine what sort of development Shohei was hoping for by encouraging Masa'aki's hatred.

That must be why Masa'aki was so much more hostile when we ran into each other in the library. It was my fault Masanobu couldn't live with him and that anger knocked everything else aside.

Wataru finally understood that much, but still Masanobu's decision bothered him. It was Masanobu's decision where and how he wanted to live. Wataru's opinion had no place in that equation and he wouldn't want to offer it. It made sense, but now that he'd found out all this, he couldn't just congratulate Masanobu on finding his new job anymore.

"Hey, Wataru. You're never going to switch to him, are you?" Masa'aki touched on the unshakable truth. "So if Masanobu stays in Japan, his life will be empty."

"I—"

Unable to respond, Wataru fell silent. He could neither confirm it nor deny it and he felt that made him the greatest coward of all.

"I'm pretty shocked by this. I thought he had forgotten about Yuina and found happiness, but instead—he's in love with a man! And on top of that, it's unrequited! That really pisses me off. Masanobu keeps insisting that you're his favorite underclassman, but I see through it all now."

Wataru was speechless.

"If he had even the smallest chance, it would be all right. I wouldn't agree with it, but I could at least understand why my brother wanted to stay. But it's totally hopeless, isn't it? He doesn't have even the slightest chance, does he?"

As Masa'aki bore down on Wataru with a desperate gaze, an image of Masanobu from the day before came to Wataru's mind. At that time, he had felt the strong conviction that he didn't want to make Masanobu to

be sad anymore. In order to do that he had to be more resolute and keep his vision clear of confusion.

"That's right," Wataru said with a single, deep breath.

I'm sorry, Asaka. Wataru knew it was arrogant of him, but he had to apologize.

"I love Kazuki and no one can ever take his place."

"You—"

"So no matter how Masanobu feels about me, I can't return those feelings. Kazuki is the only thing that matters to me. I have to protect him."

Wataru's resolve clarified his voice into something commanding that colored the pure night air. Masa'aki's lips started to move, he wanted to say something, but in the end he couldn't speak.

"Masa'aki—"

A quiet voice came down to them through their silence. When they looked up, they saw Masanobu standing there smiling at them. Neither of them had seen him arrive.

"So you *did* come here. I saw that you'd played with my cell phone, so I suspected, but—I'm surprised at you."

"Masanobu, I—"

"Let's go home. We need to talk."

Masanobu approached them with a speed that belied his apparent elegance and roughly grabbed his little brother's arm. Given the way Masa'aki's face twisted, he must have used considerable force. Even Masanobu, who was usually so placid, could get angry.

"It feels like all I do is apologize to you," Masanobu said to Wataru.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Wataru. I didn't think Masa'aki would be so deluded and terrorize you. I'll give him a good talking-to so I hope you can forgive him."

"They're not delusions! I found out everything, Masanobu!" Masa'aki broke in. He still hadn't learned, even though Masanobu was holding onto his arm. But Wataru was more worried that Masanobu had overheard their conversation. He was accustomed to seeing only kindness on Masanobu's face and there was no way for Wataru to find out the truth, but if Masanobu *had* heard, how would he take it?

That's how I feel. I would have to say it to him at some point, anyway. Wataru reassured himself, but this unexpected development had sent his heart into chaos.

Then, seemingly discerning Wataru's thoughts, Masanobu spoke up, "Wataru, do you have...ten minutes to talk on the phone tonight?"

"Uh, yes."

"Great. Can I call you at eleven o'clock, then?"

Masanobu sounded like he was making plans to play tomorrow. But Wataru nodded once, slowly, keeping his complicated thoughts to himself.

"Wataru, I'm sorry my little brother acted so rude to you today. I never thought he would go over to your house. I really let him have it, so I hope you can forgive him."

Just as he'd promised, Masanobu called at eleven o'clock and the first words out of his mouth were an apology.

"Masa'aki told me what he went over there to talk to you about. I'm really sorry. I spoke without thinking and got you involved. It must have been terrible for you."

"No, I'm fine. It didn't bother me at all. I mean, at first I was angry, but I understand that he's just really worried about you. And besides, Masa'aki is going back to America next month. So that means I won't have to deal with him forever."

"Yes...about that..."

Strangely, Masanobu answered ambiguously, like a problem had arisen. After being pestered about going to America every day by his little brother, Masanobu must have been ready to give in. Wataru had taken the call in his own room when that unexpected answer reached his ears.

"I'm thinking of going back as well."

"You're what?"

"The renovation club's activities have lightened during the university's winter break. And I haven't seen my parents in a whole year, so when my brother leaves, I thought...Well, if I'm leaving anyway, I can leave Japan earlier and get settled in. So I was thinking of leaving at the beginning of next month."

"The beginning of next month?"

"I think I'll be gone by the time you have your exams. But I'll still be supporting you from afar."

This was so sudden that Wataru's mind was

momentarily thrown into chaos. A few hours earlier, Masa'aki had just been rampaging, saying it was Wataru's fault his brother wouldn't go home. Now things had taken a sudden turn.

"Um, is Masa'aki all right with that? I mean, that's almost one month ahead of schedule."

"He's fine with anything, as long as I go with him," Masanobu answered with a grim laugh, before falling silent. Wataru had no problem with Masanobu's decision, but he couldn't figure out why Masanobu had made it. Maybe Masanobu felt responsible for Masa'aki's behavior and decided to take him back to America so he wouldn't cause any more trouble.

I can believe Asaka would do something like that, but...

If Wataru stopped him now, he might become the "fleeting kindness" that Shohei had talked about. Wataru heard Shohei's voice circling in his head, sharply declaring, *That would be a fraud.*

"Wataru?"

Wataru was jolted back to his senses by Masanobu's gentle voice.

"Do you remember how I told you I want to manage a café?"

"I remember. You told me that time you took me to a Chinese tea shop."

"That's right! I wanted to be the store coordinator. There are people like that in Japan right now, but I feel like most of them double as architects or interior designers. But I want to push my work ahead on all fronts. I don't want to just be responsible for a regular

team. I want to give smart orders based on familiarity with everything, from the personnel to the building materials necessary to make a store."

Wataru's breath caught. *Wow.* It was hard work to master one career, but the job Masanobu was after would shoulder the role of unifying all those things. Naturally, it would require many times the normal amount of knowledge and ability, and would even need the charm and strength of will to pull other people along. Masanobu intended to do alone the work that even Shohei could only accomplish in a group.

"If I go over there, I want to do a lot of background research and then come back," Asaka said.

"What?"

"I'm sure Masa'aki told you, but I had originally planned to go to America after I graduated from college. But I can't just fly over and get a job there, so I'll study first. I visited a couple of schools before, and if they're interested, I'll take a leave of absence from T University. Once I come back and finish the arrangements, I'll start living there in the spring and then get ready for school in the fall."

"And then you're not coming back?"

"That's right."

In contrast to Masanobu, who was speaking calmly, Wataru was surprised at how upset he was. There was a world of difference between the implications of using the winter break to go see his parents and doing background research for studying abroad.

"B-but what about the job offer? Shohei will never give in and let you—"

"You're sharp. I tried to raise the subject with him yesterday, but he wouldn't listen."

"Well of course not! I'm shocked that you would do something so irresponsible, too! If you reject the offer, that's going to reflect badly on your whole department!"

Wataru's voice suddenly grew wild with his fervor and he gripped his cell phone fiercely. Apparently Masanobu hadn't expected him to get this worked up, because Wataru could sense his bewilderment on the other end of the line. No matter how far in advance he'd had these plans, until only a short time ago, he had decided to work in Japan. Since he was reversing that on short notice, Wataru wanted a good reason.

"Wataru, I—"

"...I'm sorry. I was out of line."

Wataru interrupted Masanobu and let out a deep sigh. When he considered that he may have had a part in Masanobu's decision, it was hard to remain calm, but he told himself to calm down.

"But why would you do this so suddenly? This is your fourth year, isn't it? You can just do it after you graduate, or—"

"If I moved that slowly, Shohei might trap me. See? That man is a master of persuasion. He would break me down eventually, and then I would never study abroad. Make no mistake, if I stayed, I would be working in his office in no time."

Masanobu spoke lightly, but his argument was quite persuasive. It still wasn't enough to win Wataru over though. Wataru's feelings may have been lies or

somehow incomplete, but he wouldn't let them go so easily. He could never be dismissive of Masanobu.

"Are you really sure about this, Asaka?"

"Don't talk like we're never going to see each other again."

Masanobu chuckled, and then whispered in a very faint voice, "Thank you." The deep quality of his voice revealed how much he had struggled to reach this conclusion.

On the night they had visited the temple, Masanobu had been "sad and beautiful" after his encounter with Wataru and Kazuki. Wataru was certain that he wore the same expression now, on the other end of the line. He felt sure of it and his heart ached.

"You two didn't seem to notice me at all," Masanobu said. "When I realized Masa'aki had gone to your house, I went straight after him. I thought he would go too far again and I was going to scold him and bring him home. But—"

Masanobu faltered suddenly, giving a glimpse of his hesitation. He said he'd left immediately, but Wataru hadn't seen Masanobu once while he had been standing around talking to Masa'aki. They had talked a long time and then, just as he'd thought he was getting in the last few words, Masanobu had appeared with excellent timing.

So he was hidden somewhere listening to us.

If that was true, then that meant he had heard what Wataru had said. So Masanobu knew that Wataru had declared no one would ever replace Kazuki. Putting aside Wataru's conflict, Masanobu seemed finally ready and began speaking again.

"I'm sorry that we have to do this over the phone, but this is a very important time for you and I don't want to take too much time away from you. So I'll explain this simply."

"Asaka—"

"I saw you two talking and I just couldn't reveal myself. I didn't know how I could face you since Masa'aki was unloading so much on you. So even though I felt like a coward, I hid."

Wataru could say nothing.

"He told you why he was taking it all out on you, right? It's true that I was reluctant to go to America because I cared for you. I let that slip to Masa'aki unintentionally and I really feel very sorry that you were forced to endure such unpleasant experiences. But—"

Wataru could tell by Masanobu's silence that he was struggling to keep his voice from shaking so that he wouldn't get emotional. But Wataru had no way of responding, so in the end all he could do was hear Masanobu out.

"But when my little brother cornered you and asked you if you were ever going to 'switch,' I'm ashamed to admit it, but for a moment, I had hope. I hated myself for it."

"Please...please don't think that of yourself. I—"

"It isn't as though I expected you to say you would, Wataru. I fell in love with you knowing full well that Kazuki was your boyfriend. Your feelings weren't going to change that easily and I think that's what attracted me to you. In that moment, I glimpsed an unattainable dream. But then, when I saw you having such trouble

answering Masa'aki, I was jolted back to reality."

Wataru could imagine the rest without needing Masanobu say it. Masanobu had confessed to Wataru by asking "do you mind if I love you anyway?" He had said that he had recovered from the loss of his girlfriend's death and was just happy that he could love someone again.

But feelings of love grow day by day. Wataru had experienced that firsthand with Yuichi. Masanobu couldn't keep his feelings in the same place forever and if he stepped beyond those bounds to try and win Wataru, it would only bring conflict and pain.

But if he had hope, he could keep trying.

In facing down Masa'aki, Wataru had shattered Masanobu's reckless dreams in an instant. When that happened, Masanobu realized his feelings had grown beyond his control and he feared that his heart would twist from sorrow.

"You said it best, Wataru. No one can replace Kazuki. He's the only thing that matters to you. You held your head high with pride when you said that, and it shut Masa'aki up."

"Asaka—"

"It was the same yesterday. You spoke your mind to Shohei magnificently. You told him you would become a man worthy of Kazuki and you were prepared to walk beside him. When I heard that, you showed me that you didn't need me anymore, that you were strong now. If I stayed now, I would become a man who would never want the person he loves to grow."

These last words startled Wataru, and he had no

reply. That was one of the conditions he'd imposed in order to put a natural distance between himself and Masanobu. He wanted to overcome the weakness of his heart and forge a new bond with Masanobu. But Wataru had finally realized that things would not be that simple.

"It was my job as a friend of justice to save people weaker than myself," Masanobu said, his voice tinged with laughter in order to lighten the mood.

Wataru knew he had to say something, but the more frantic he became, the more his lips refused to move. "I, uh—"

"I can care for you no matter where I am in the world."

"A-Asaka?"

"It's almost time for your exams. You need to open a new door under your own power. So I want you to think of this phone call as my own personal cheer. I want to take this opportunity to be alone and look into my own heart."

Masanobu's voice was not stubborn, but it contained an echo of fortitude that canceled out all interference. Wataru realized dazedly how powerless he was against Masanobu with nothing but his indecisive words.

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not leaving forever this time and I'm not trying to give you up, either. But I want to think of something I can do for you, Wataru. Something only I can do, and Kazuki can't. I'm sure I'll find one thing, at least."

"Asaka—"

"Once I do, I'll be able to be by your side nobly."

As he outlined his firm resolution, Masanobu's voice was infinitely kind.

What an incredible person...

Wataru didn't know if he really deserved to be cared for so much. But Masanobu had told him he was captivated by the way Wataru acted when he was in love. In that case, Wataru wanted to honor that feeling by living up to it. In that sense, Masanobu's love would never have developed without Yuichi. He wanted Masanobu to think of that irony of fate as good luck in the end.

Asaka—I made a decision, too. It wouldn't work if we stayed in the same place.

Wataru put his phone back on its charger after their call ended and made his own resolution. It would be nice to run to Yuichi's apartment. Wataru opened his window and sent his white breath melting into the night air as he held his ring up to the night sky.

Wataru rang the doorbell again and again and heard an annoyed answer from the other side of the door. "I'm coming!"

It was natural, though since it was eight o'clock in the morning.

"I'm sorry for coming so early, Kazuki. Would you please open the door?"

"Wataru? Is something wrong?"

Yuichi's voice was suddenly alert as he hurriedly opened the front door, his concern jolting him awake.

The sight of Yuichi Kazuki dressed in pajamas looking defenseless was surely something precious that only Wataru could witness.

"You surprised me," Yuichi said. "Do you have time to go out for walks in the morning? Or are you on your way home after a late night?"

"That's not very likely, is it? I've been studying all night like I'm supposed to. But I needed to see your face and tell you something. I couldn't wait until this afternoon, so I came now."

"You needed to see me? And...tell me something?"

"Well, let me in first. I'm freezing from waiting outside."

Wataru laughed, his cheeks and the tip of his nose red, and the sound pulled Yuichi out of his bewilderment to smile as well. He gestured for Wataru to come in and, as soon as he'd set foot inside the door, he suddenly grabbed his arms.

"Hey, wh-what are you—" Wataru stared at him in surprise, and Yuichi pulled him closer and held him tightly. As the door closed slowly behind him, Yuichi grumbled, "You really are frozen." His wry voice was relaxed and Wataru sighed against his chest. Each time he heard Yuichi's heart beat, he felt his temperature rising.

"I'm sorry to show up out of nowhere, without even calling. I felt so rushed—"

"I don't mind, but it must be something bad. Did my brother...?"

"It's not that. And it's nothing bad, either."

After Yuichi had warmed him up a little, Wataru took his sneakers off at once and went into the apartment. It had been ten days since he'd been there, but it was as clean as always, a huge difference from his own room that had clothes, magazines, and empty bottles scattered everywhere.

Wataru could imagine what they would say to each other once they started to live together. Yuichi would probably lecture him every day not to drop his stuff everywhere. If everything went smoothly, he would have the best spring of his life ahead him.

I shouldn't have woken him up.

Yuichi had probably jumped out of bed to get to the front door. Wataru saw his sheets were tangled from being slept in and he felt an overwhelming wave of affection. They had slept together many times there, but naturally the mood and even the temperature were entirely different when they were here together and when Yuichi was alone.

That's right... Wataru keenly savored the feeling.

He was blessed to have experienced that difference with his body.

"Do you want some coffee? If you're cold I can turn the heater up—"

"Kazuki, I have a favor to ask you. I want you to go to New York and see Mizuho."

If he faltered even once, Wataru didn't think he would be able to say it, so he spoke in a rush, not even pausing for breath. As he'd expected, Yuichi stared at him in wide-eyed surprise.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I don't have

any ulterior motives."

"It's just...you..."

"Asaka called me yesterday. It made me aware of how pathetic I am. Afterwards, I spent all night thinking about what I wanted to say to you. This came to me as the answer."

"You talked to Asaka?"

"Oh, yes...But I took care of my work first! My mind felt sharp and refreshed. It felt like my concentration was way better than usual, too. I caught back up on everything after I went out yesterday afternoon."

"Hey, hold on a second."

Wataru's excitement was making him babble and it looked like Yuichi couldn't follow what he was saying. He frowned and stopped Wataru, then sank heavily onto the edge of his bed.

"Sorry, but you're going too fast. I can't understand. Tell me what happened, in order, after Asaka called you."

"Sorry."

Yuichi peered up at him and Wataru instantly came back to his senses. Yuichi waved him over and Wataru sheepishly sat down beside him, but Yuichi surprised Wataru by circling an arm around his head and roughly pulling him to his chest.

"Ack! K-Kazuki!"

"What did Asaka call you about?"

"It wasn't anything like weird, I—hey! That hurts!"

"You wake me up first thing in the morning and

look at me with these glistening black eyes, and—What is the connection between that phone call and Mizuho? You want me to go see my ex-girlfriend that badly?”

“No, that’s not it.”

From Yuichi’s perspective, the result of trying not to hurt Wataru was his own suffering. Seeing Wataru thwart it so chipperly must have been an utterly outrageous feeling. Wataru regretted that his approach had perhaps lacked in delicacy, and as Yuichi held his head, Wataru stared firmly back at his sour face.

“Kazuki—”

“What?”

“You’re the most important thing in the world to me. I’ve said it so many times already, but it’s really, really true. That’s why I want you to go to New York and cheer Mizuho up.”

Apparently he still hadn’t communicated his feelings very well, because Yuichi’s baffled expression didn’t go away. But Wataru pushed ahead. He wanted to be loyal to the impulse welling up inside him, rather than worry about making his story coherent.

“Yesterday you told me that I’m the most important thing to you. That made me so happy. And I understand that if you go after all this time, it would give her hope and that would be cruel. But—”

“But?”

“But this really is a worst case scenario, isn’t it? Mizuho must be feeling so helpless before such major surgery. I think it took a lot of courage for her to say ‘I want to see you’ to someone who doesn’t even reply to her cards. Plus—maybe it’s bad luck to say this, but—if

something bad happens, you'll blame yourself for not going to see her."

"Wataru—"

This last argument brought doubt into Yuichi's eyes. He had obviously had misgivings about that, as well. Because he was a person who felt remorse and took responsibility, Wataru knew he had to say it for him. If anyone else had suggested it, Yuichi's resolve would never waver. But if they didn't overcome this, Mizuho would just become a source of bitterness between them. Wataru didn't want that. He didn't want to deny the past when Yuichi had cared deeply about her.

"You don't need to worry about me, Kazuki. I trust you."

"That's not the problem. I—"

"I love you, Kazuki. So you have to trust me more, too. It's okay; I promised you I would pass, didn't I? Even if you're not here in Japan, I'll have our ring. I'll be prepared to do my best."

When Wataru made this firm vow, Yuichi's expression softened ever so slightly. It didn't seem like his feelings had changed completely, but at least he was beginning to listen. In Wataru's presence, he showed no sign of caring about Mizuho, but if that were the case he never would have brought her card home from his parents' house. Even without that, it was obvious that he was worried about her condition.

Honestly—enough with the brave front.

Wataru reached out and quietly wrapped his arms around Yuichi. Yuichi took the opportunity to circle his arm around Wataru, and squeezed him back tightly. The

words they couldn't speak aloud were transferred into the heat of their bodies and the two stayed silent for a long while, feeling each other's warmth.

"Asaka is going to New York to study abroad," Wataru whispered faintly as he listened to the beating of Yuichi's heart. "He can't start the study abroad right away, but he's going to America soon to look for a program. He called me last night and told me. His family already lives there and they've been telling him to come over for a while. Even his little brother came to Japan to convince him."

"Ah. Then I guess it was only natural that the kid with the brother complex took his frustration out on you."

"What?"

"Asaka would never go to America with you around. Since he suddenly brought up studying abroad, something must have happened. Well, maybe it's better not to investigate too deeply. Although I can guess."

Yuichi was very pragmatic. That was all he said before turning a meaningful smile on Wataru.

"I'm not doing anything I can't tell you about, Kazuki."

"I know, I know. You're not stupid, Wataru. Now have you finally learned?"

"Learned what?"

"That Asaka is pretty dangerous. He looks like a placid honor student, but his feelings for others are so intense. His old girlfriend should be proof enough of that. How can a man who's so nearly perfect continue to love a single woman for so long? Someone he had

already been broken up with, even. No matter how in love someone is, I don't think most people could do that."

The serenity of Yuichi's tone as he spoke offered a truth he could see because he had distanced himself from Masanobu. While Wataru nodded at Yuichi's observation, he remembered the voice from the night before. Wataru wondered how deeply Masanobu's heart had cracked when he'd revealed glimpsing "an unattainable dream."

"I don't want to talk about people, but—" Wataru started.

Yuichi patted Wataru's back, as if he'd sensed his pain.

"Asaka is awkward that way," Yuichi said. "He can manage better than most people, but falling in love is the one thing that he's not good at. Maybe with a regular girl, he could be happy, but he seems to prefer people with flaws. He focuses more on loving people than on being loved. With a guy like that, trying to shield him or indulge him doesn't work."

"Kazuki—"

What Yuichi said was definitely true. Masanobu's kindness was a double-edged sword with people like Wataru and Yuina. Maybe he had realized that himself.

"I would become a man who would never want the person he loves to grow."

The voice over the phone echoed sadly in Wataru's mind, making its gloomy prediction. When Masanobu had called, Wataru realized how much he had taken advantage of him. If Masanobu reached out a hand, it

was to touch Wataru gently; if Wataru came to a stop in confusion, Masanobu faintly illuminated the path. Wataru had never depended on that, but he realized how much he had come to callously accept it.

It's true. I didn't have any idea what Masanobu meant by telling me he was a "friend of justice." I tried to ignore Mizuho, too, because I told myself Kazuki had made his decision. But that was wrong. Asaka never gave up his pride, and I can't just run away from unpleasant things.

Wataru repeated these things firmly to himself, but even so, he held onto his wavering smile desperately. Right now, that was all he could do. In any case, he wanted Yuichi to believe that he would be all right by himself.

"Are you sure you'll be all right, Wataru? Even if I go to New York?" Yuichi asked, checking to see how committed he was. He loosened his hold on Wataru and gently pulled away from him as he spoke.

"No more unnatural stoicism for either of us. We promised, right?"

"I know, I mean everything I'm saying. Just trust me."

"Wataru...the way I felt when we talked at my brother's house—that was real. I don't want to hurt you. Even if I have to make someone else sad, I don't care."

There was no hesitation or remorse in his voice. Wataru felt like Yuichi's solemn gaze had filled him to the very tips of his fingers.

"Thank you, Kazuki."

There was anxiety deep in Wataru's heart, and it

would be a lie to say he wasn't trying to ignore it or that he wasn't doing this against his will. But if he were to hold Yuichi back now, those feelings wouldn't go away. They might as well face them head on and beat them back together. Wataru had never once thought of having the kind of romance with Yuichi that moved forward because of experience or technique. He only wanted to love him forever.

"Kazuki, go see Mizuho. And give her the strength to get her through the surgery."

"Wataru—"

Their bodies simultaneously drew closer once more and they opened their arms and embraced each other. Their hearts beat against each other, their breath mingled, and their temperature rose at the same speed.

"I love you, Wataru."

"I love you too, Kazuki. A lot."

Wataru's confession tickled his ears and a happy smile spilled over his lips. They lay down together on the still-warm sheets and kissed again and again, never tiring of it, as if it were an extension of their conversation.

"Remember how you came to see me in the middle of the night?" Wataru asked, resting from the kisses.

"Yeah?" Yuichi said, looking a little confused.

"You said there was something you wanted to talk to me about, and I was thinking about that. You'd told me you would come running any time, but it was so sudden. I was really happy, but at the same time I was worried that something had happened. It's just that normally you never would have talked about it if I asked,

so I thought it would be bad to pry. So, if I'm right, then you must have—"

"I got a phone call from Mizuho."

Wataru had been prepared for this revelation and accepted it, thinking, *I knew it*. Yuichi had hidden it very well, but Wataru had not been mistaken in sensing a faint awkwardness in him that night.

"I told you I wrote her a letter, right? I said I couldn't go to New York, but I could at least talk to her, and gave her my cell phone number and e-mail address. So she called me straight from the hospital to thank me for my letter."

"Come on, that's not all she said, is it? Be more honest, Kazuki. Are you still going to play dumb at this point? If all you did was talk to Mizuho on the phone, don't you think it's weird that you wanted to see my face in the middle of the night?"

"Man—"

I want to see your face all the time, whether it's the middle of the night or early in the morning, his face seemed to say, and he sighed, still pinning Wataru down on the bed.

"The truth is, there's another reason I was reluctant to go to New York."

"There is?"

"Yeah. Mizuho told me the exact date of her surgery over the phone...it's the day after the entrance exam to M University. That means if I want to go see her, I have to fly out the day you're taking your exam, at the latest. I don't know for sure without checking the airline schedules, but I think the departure flight would

be either the day before or the day of your exam."

"Really?"

"Don't tell me to leave earlier, either. I want to be here to support you right to the very end. I know I can't do anything just being nearby, but it would be even worse if I was actually gone the day of the exam."

Yuichi had anticipated his objection and he appealed to Wataru with an arrogant gaze that seemed to say, *Well? I covered all the bases.* Wataru had never suspected that the surgery would fall on the same day as his exam and it took time for him to collect himself.

She told him they'd picked the date at the end of the year, so I thought it was sooner. But I guess there might be all kinds of tests before the surgery. So Kazuki won't be there...

This was unexpected, but there didn't seem to be anything to do but accept it. Wataru reached a hand up to Yuichi's cheek and smiled as he cupped his palm around it.

"I understand. It's okay. Everyone is alone when they're taking an exam. I'll do my best anyway. By the time you get back, I'll already have rocked the exam," Wataru promised, full of confidence, and Yuichi brought his lips closer to him. He all but said *That's enough conversation*, and with a luscious sigh Wataru closed his eyes innocently.

Wataru breathed, accepting the kiss, and reality retreated with the leaping pulse of his heart. The sensation of being loosely pinned down gradually added to his wildly pounding heart until Wataru was seized by the sensation that even his breath was being stolen from him.

"Kazuki...Kazuki..." he repeated deliriously, his heart fluttering at the sound of the name. Yuichi's fingers touched the buttons of his shirt and Wataru squirmed slightly. It took some courage to bare his skin in the room filled with morning sunlight. But that slight hesitation melted away instantly with the caress of Yuichi's fingertips.

"Ah—"

Yuichi's lips left obscene marks all over Wataru's feverish skin. Waves of pleasure swept out from them, and Wataru couldn't stop them. Yuichi's right hand trailed over the inside of his thighs and began to tease him. Cries he could not hold back welled up within him, one after another, and their sound made his body grow even hotter.

"Kazuki—Ah!"

"I love the way you say that."

"Q-quit it!"

Yuichi's unhurried whisper frustrated Wataru and he opened his eyes slightly to glare at him. At some point Yuichi had pulled his shirt off like Wataru, and he smiled down at Wataru triumphantly

"Every part of you belongs to me, Wataru. So let me do what I want."

"W-what did you—"

"In exchange, you can do whatever you want to me."

Yuichi breathed this last part against Wataru's ear and the sound of temptation made Wataru dizzy. All the strength slipped out of his body, as if he'd been paralyzed, leaving only the part of him that tangled the

sheets as delicate fingers dominated him.

Yuichi leaned over Wataru once more, nuzzling his chest with his lips. He rolled the tip of his tongue over Wataru's and toyed with his nipple, chasing Wataru into the depths of pleasure and shame in moments.

"Ah-angh! Mm—"

Wataru's moans slipped unrestrainedly from his throat, blending with the soft, wet sound of Yuichi's tongue. That sparked Wataru's sensuality and stirred Yuichi to even bolder actions. His right hand slipped into Wataru's underwear between caresses, and with no way to resist it, Wataru accepted his touch. Yuichi began to lavish attention on Wataru's member, which stiffened and twitched beneath his touch. That alone threatened to make Wataru climax.

"K-Kazu...ki—ah!"

Wataru's body, leaping like a fish, was no longer dominated by passion alone. Bewildered by a roaring lust inside him, Wataru could no longer trust his emotions.

"I—I want to touch you, too." Wataru's voice was sweetly hoarse as he begged, eliciting a loving sigh from Yuichi. That reaction gave him courage and Wataru reached tentatively for Yuichi's hips. He traced the contours with his fingertips and, when he touched Yuichi's manhood, a sigh of relief escaped him. Their bodies fit together perfectly, their lips and fingers expressing their love.

"Unh—ahh..."

"Wataru...I love you...I need you, Wataru..."

Nectar spilled into Yuichi's hand and Wataru rushed ahead, wanting to hurry into his excitement. His

honest reaction colored Yuichi's breathing, making it uneven, and he could tell that Yuichi was nearing his climax, too. They impatiently tore off what was left of their clothes and Wataru moved ahead, spreading his legs. Yuichi had continued stirring him up with his fingers until the gesture became natural.

"Are you ready, Wataru?"

The sexiness of Yuichi's whispered question sent a thrill through Wataru. He wanted to connect with Yuichi as soon as he could and clung to his back. Taking that as a "yes," Yuichi entered him little by little. It thrilled Wataru that Yuichi was so careful not to cause him pain, no matter how eager he was.

"Ungh—ah...Ahh!"

As Yuichi penetrated him deeply, Wataru's back arched. Beneath his ragged breathing, a rhythm began that matched the racing beat of his heart, jolting Wataru's senses. He tensed to the very tips of his fingers and his skin, slick with sweat, rubbed against Yuichi until it ached. Assaulted by an even stronger wave, Wataru's mind at last went white.

"Kazuki—that's—please—a-angh!"

"Wataru...Wataru—"

As they called each other's names, their bodies and pleasures intertwined, they rushed together toward climax. Wataru dug his nails into Yuichi's back and tears started in his eyes. Facing their fleeting separation, he whispered his wish that this moment could continue forever.

The moment Wataru took his first step outside the examination hall, a faint, cold sensation brushed his cheek.

"No way! It's snowing!"

"Are you serious? Oh, it *is*!"

One after another, students were looking up at the sky, and Wataru slowly lifted his face as well. Tiny crystals fell onto the corner of his eye and lips, as if they had just been waiting for him to tilt his head back. "Brrr!"

As Wataru shivered, he thought of Yuichi's voice. When he had run to Yuichi's apartment that one morning to tell him to go see Mizuho, Yuichi had hugged him tightly and teased him: "You really are frozen." But his warm voice had instantly raised the temperature of Wataru's body, which felt like it had been chilled to the core.

"Kazuki is still on the plane right now. It takes half a day to get there, after all."

Once Yuichi had decided to go to America, they had both been constantly busy and hadn't been able to take any time to see each other, so it still didn't seem real. In that sense, it was a good thing that the day of the exam was the same day Yuichi's flight left, Wataru thought absently. He had been ticking off the days like a countdown, and if he'd gone to the airport to see Yuichi off, he might have regretted it. It was only because the day of Wataru's exam and the day Yuichi left were one and the same that nothing so pathetic had happened.

"It would have been nice to see this snow together..."

These words of longing slipped out of Wataru, and he gazed up at the frail snowfall wistfully.

"Okay, Wataru, I'll be back," Yuichi had said while he was getting ready to leave. "Call me or e-mail me if you need anything. I bought a cell phone to use over there so you can. Okay?"

"Okay, okay, I got it. Say hello to Mizuho for me...or would that would be weird?"

As Yuichi's boyfriend, giving his regards to Yuichi's ex-girlfriend would probably just sound sarcastic. He thought it over earnestly, and Yuichi chuckled at him over the phone.

"If her condition is stable, I'll tell her, sure. It's okay, she's an adult; you don't need to walk on eggshells with her. More importantly, good luck tomorrow."

"Kazuki—"

"I'll be in the air while you're taking the exam. I'll be praying for you so I don't get nervous when we take off. It'll reach you through the ring."

"Okay."

I can't monopolize his past, but in the future, Kazuki belongs completely to me.

Though Wataru was the one who had decided to send Yuichi to New York, now that they were truly going to be apart, waves of anxiety and sadness came over him. But now that the time had come, Wataru would die before he let Yuichi hear that whining, so he held his cell phone tightly and forced a smile onto his face.

"Thank you, Kazuki. Don't catch a cold or

anything while you're in New York."

"I should be telling you that. It was this time last year that you were sick in bed, wasn't it?"

"You've got a good memory."

Wataru laughed freely, remembering how Yuichi had come to visit him when he was sick. Back then, neither one of them would have ever dreamed that one year later Yuichi would be going to visit his "strictly speaking" girlfriend. When Wataru thought about that, he felt like their bond had deepened considerably since then. He hoped that they would never turn back to the past again, and would be able to walk forward, looking only toward the future.

"Well, I shouldn't stay on the phone too long, so I'll let you go."

"Oh, okay. You're right, I'll go to sleep early tonight, too."

"Geez. When you sound all helpless like that, I can't hang up. Do you want me to go over there?" Yuichi asked suddenly.

Wataru couldn't fool Yuichi easily. Wataru could tell from his voice that he was serious about his offer, but he wouldn't make Yuichi do that the night before his trip. If he saw Yuichi, it would just make the sadness worse. And with the exams so close at hand, he had no idea what selfish things he might say.

"I told you, I'm fine. You're going to be in New York for two weeks, right? I'm not a little kid; it'll be a cinch. They'll post the results while you're gone, too. It'll go by in a flash."

"Let me know right away if you pass."

"I will. I'll put my ring in my pencil case. They're my good luck charms."

Wataru's spirit had recovered while they'd been talking, and Yuichi sounded relieved, too. The mood flowing over the phone had become peaceful, and a poignant silence fell over them.

"I'll see you, Wataru," Yuichi said at last, cutting through their complicated feelings. "I love you, so don't cheat on me."

"Hey! You think I have time for that?"

"How should I know? You aren't going to keep in touch with Asaka, are you? He might call off his trip to New York unexpectedly. I doubt that guy could leave Japan without saying goodbye to you."

"You might run into him in New York, Kazuki."

"Stop making jokes that aren't funny."

An image of Yuichi wrinkling his face in disgust floated in front of Wataru's eyes. The warm emotions that filled Wataru's heart would make everything okay, even if they were apart.

"I love you, Kazuki," he whispered, breathing new life into the words he had uttered countless times before. He hoped they would stay in Yuichi's heart and the sound of them wouldn't fade until he got back to Japan. With that wish, Wataru hung up the phone.

Two weeks from today...I've finished my exams, so how am I going to pass all this time? I still have school, but maybe I should invite Kawamura out to do something. It's been a while since we've done that. Or

maybe I should go to the realtor's office first.

As Wataru gazed at the swirling flurries of snow, his thoughts ranged over subjects high and low. He could feel the joy of being liberated slowly spreading through his body after months of pressure. He'd done well on the exam and he wanted to run all the way to the station and shout the news at someone. If only Yuichi had been there, he could have done that, but there was no helping it now, unfortunately.

But oh well. I was the one who told him to go.

Wataru picked up a quick pace despite this frustration, revealing how unburdened his heart really was. Even if he hadn't cast off his sadness, he'd gotten rid of his immediate burden. *What should I do tonight, though?* he thought, walking along briskly, and his thoughts turned to Yuichi. He wondered where his plane was now in the snowy sky.

That reminds me...I wonder if Asaka really did go to New York. I haven't gotten any calls or e-mail from him since we talked. I'm a little worried, but...I want to be alone and look into my heart.

After making that decision, Wataru felt it would be petty to harass Masanobu for news. Since Yuichi was in America, he had no emotion to spare, so Wataru wouldn't know what became of Masanobu after that.

What should I do? My exams are over now, and I wanted to let Asaka know that. But maybe it's better if I don't contact him.

When Wataru thought about Masanobu, his heart still ached. Whether Masanobu was in Japan or not, it was because of him that Wataru had done as well as he had.

Wataru was mulling it over, unable to decide on what to do, when he accidentally bumped into someone.

"Excuse me!"

"It's dangerous to walk around all glassy-eyed, you know."

"Oh—"

"Hello, Wataru."

When Wataru jerked his head up, he saw Masanobu smiling brightly at him. Wataru was bewildered, since he had just been thinking about him.

"I heard from Shohei that Kazuki left today. And—I'm sorry, I have a confession to make. Shohei said I should 'capitalize on' this, but I don't really want to do that. That's not what I—Wataru?"

"Asaka...Why are you—"

After that, no other words would come out. Wataru was sure his face was in an awful, slack-jawed state, too. But he could not summon the strength to compose his face and he just continued to stare at Masanobu. Freed from all the pressure of the exams, Wataru had happened to think about Masanobu and then, by coincidence, Masanobu had run into him. That simple fact wholly filled his mind.

"Congratulations on your exams," Masanobu said fondly, putting aside all his excuses, as if he had seen everything in Wataru's face. His gentle gaze hadn't changed, but Wataru had thought he might not ever see it again, so it touched his heart more than usual. When Wataru finally managed to smile, Masanobu told him something unexpected.

"Wataru, I've decided to stay in Japan a little longer."

"What?"

"Like I told you on the phone before, I was planning to go back with my little brother at the very beginning of this month. But when I tried to turn down the job offer, Shohei wouldn't let me. I went to apologize to him several times, and we talked it over, but...well, the man is lord of his castle. He refused to accept when I simply said no, so in fact I'm still in limbo."

"I...see. He must really want you there."

"I don't think that's all it is, but I thought I should give it a try."

Wataru didn't know what was going on, but a mischievous expression came over Masanobu's face and he seemed very upbeat. The last time Wataru had seen him had been in the evening and it had left a very somber impression, so this was a relief.

"You must be disappointed now that you've finished your exams and Kazuki's not here. I doubt I'm enough, but it might be better than being alone. Besides, I've been terrified of running into you somewhere after that phone call. It would be pretty bad if I didn't get a chance to explain the situation first, you know?"

"Please, don't worry about that. So is Masa'aki still here, too?"

"Yes, and he's mad. When he met Shohei, he was rabid. You and he might get along surprisingly well together if you give it a chance. If you had to categorize us, doesn't it seem like Kazuki and I are in one group and you and Masa'aki are in another?"

As they walked side by side, Masanobu continued chatting about trivial things. His speech flowed on with a

gentle tempo, not compelling him to answer, and Wataru found it oddly pleasant. When Masanobu suggested that they rest, they stepped into a little park they were passing. Perhaps because Wataru's heart was more liberated by the joy of being done with his exams, there was a part of him that relaxed with Masanobu just as he used to when they'd first met.

"It looks like the snow is stopping."

There were no children playing in the park because of the weather. Masanobu stopped in front of the swings and caught some of the snowflakes on the palm of his hand, then slowly turned around to look at Wataru.

"He was joking when he said to capitalize on this, before," Masanobu said.

"You mean Shohei? That guy is really unbelievable. He's always plotting something or other."

"Would it bother you if I said I would stay in Japan until Kazuki comes back?"

"What?" Wataru wanted to ask him why he'd said that, but all the answers were in the words he'd just spoken. Wataru fought back his rioting heart, then turned to Masanobu and somehow strung his words together.

"Asaka, um, what does that—"

"I heard everything. About how Kazuki is going to New York to see an old girlfriend. And about how you encouraged him to do it."

Wataru was dumbstruck.

"Shohei was laughing when he told me. Kazuki called him the day he decided to go, he said. He was saying that you had shown up first thing in the morning to pester him into going and that he was no match for

you. But when I heard that, I—I was convinced that I couldn't leave you by yourself."

It was as if Masanobu had seen through Wataru and into the depths of his heart. Wataru quickly looked away. That became a silent confirmation, and the strength in Masanobu's voice increased considerably.

"This is my personal belief, and maybe it bothers you. I'm prepared to be scorned for being overly sentimental, since I said I would leave Japan behind before your test. But I can understand how you must have felt as you sent Kazuki off. You were only thinking about what was most important for him."

Wataru felt Masanobu take a step closer to him, but he kept his head bent, staring at the snowflakes soaking into the ground as he opened his mouth to speak. "I—" But Masanobu interrupted him.

"So I made Shohei's opposition into an excuse for myself. Even if you didn't want it yourself, I decided to be honest with myself until Kazuki comes back."

"I love Kazuki. So I'm not going to fill his absence with you, Asaka. If I did something like that—I could never forgive myself."

Wataru roused his spirit and lifted his head resolutely. He stared straight back at Masanobu and appealed to him with trembling eyes.

"Please, don't do anything for my sake anymore. I'm not that strong. I can't bear for Kazuki to see his old girlfriend and for them to spend all that time alone together. But I can't get stuck on that."

"Wataru..."

"I'm sorry. You've done so much to improve me,

Asaka. But—”

Before he had finished saying everything, Wataru's vision darkened suddenly. By the time he figured out that Masanobu was holding him, he was trapped so tightly against Masanobu's chest that he could no longer resist.

“A-Asaka!”

“It's all right. I thought you would say that.”

Belying the strength with which he held Wataru, Masanobu's voice was faint enough to fade into the falling snow. Masanobu had discovered that his unilateral kindness caused them both pain, but still he'd been unable to stop himself from coming to see Wataru. The conflict was communicated through his warm fingertips. Although he had established a time limit, promising to stay only until Kazuki came back, it was almost unheard of for someone as wise as Masanobu to go back on something once he'd made up his mind. When Wataru thought about his state of mind, it was very difficult to refuse his embrace.

“Right now is enough,” Masanobu said.

“Wh...?”

“Won't you give me just one minute of your time? Then I'll let you go.”

Masanobu sounded as if he were praying, and his voice stole Wataru's refusal from his lips. Wataru wanted to protest, but felt he could hardly refuse Masanobu this one affectionate gesture.

In that long moment, the atmosphere between them was feverish. After Masanobu let him go, Wataru

didn't know where to walk to next, and he stared at the flurries of snow.

The Promised Ring Awaits

"I'm in, Kazuki! I passed!"

Wataru blurted out this news before he had even said hello, and was greeted with a momentary silence on the other end of the line. He had gone to check the results first thing in the morning and, after first contacting his parents, Wataru called Yuichi, his mind still exploding with excitement. More than anything else, Wataru wanted to let Yuichi know as quickly as possible.

"Kazuki, did you hear me? Hello? Hello-o-o?"

"I heard you, you don't have to shout." Wataru could hear the smirk in Yuichi's voice. In his urgency, it sounded distant and a little bit sad, perhaps the fault of the connection. Though with Yuichi in New York, it wouldn't sound rich, either. Yuichi had switched to a cell phone he could use overseas before leaving for America. It was out of consideration for Wataru, who had been studying for his exams, so he could get in touch with him right away.

"Congrats, Wataru. You worked really hard for it. If only I were there with you, I would be able to take advantage of your excitement to make love to you. It's too bad."

Wataru unconsciously gripped his phone more tightly at these words that sounded neither joking nor serious. His joy at passing remained the same, but the fact that Yuichi wasn't there seeped freshly into his heart.

"But...Mizuho's surgery ended fine, so when her condition stabilizes, you'll be able to come back. We'll be able to see each other soon, so I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Are you sure? When you say it like that, there's a ninety percent chance that you're *not* fine."

"Come on."

Yuichi was absolutely right, and Wataru faltered, but then he heard a cheerfully laughing voice. No matter where he was, Kazuki was still Kazuki, he thought, and Wataru's usual mood returned.

"It's still night there, right? Did you eat dinner already?"

"Yeah. There's nothing to do except go to the hospital, and there's a simple kitchen in my hotel room. So I'm cooking for myself way more than I do in Japan."

"Wow, I didn't expect you to say that."

"Besides that, I go to bookstores and poke my head into music stores or used clothing stores. I mean, it's not like I came here to sightsee. Mizuho wants to hear more about you, so I kill a lot of time that way, too."

"What?!"

Wataru's voice came out in an unintentional shriek at this outrageous story. It had been a week since Yuichi flew to New York, but he had never said a word about that before. Wataru had never really doubted that Yuichi would be able to talk to his ex-girlfriend about how he was currently dating a boy, but had he really revealed it so simply?

"Uh, so that means—wait—"

Wataru had shouted suddenly and loudly, and people around him were staring. Wataru quickly lowered his voice. He had gotten lost in the phone conversation, but people were picking up and turning in forms necessary to register for school nearby. He turned bright red and moved a little ways off, then turned his attention back to the phone to hear Yuichi grumbling, "You don't need to be that shocked. I had already told her about you. Of course, I picked the time to break it to her carefully. But she's an adult and it seems like she'd already guessed a certain amount."

"She...guessed?"

"She said that she could tell I had someone important in my life just by looking at my face. Right after I came in the first time, she said that. 'You stopped pretending, huh?' Isn't that obnoxious?"

Yuichi mocked her in amusement, his implication coming through: *you have nothing to worry about*. There might have been some bleak feelings behind their exchanges, but since Wataru would only be wasting his time thinking about it, he decided not to worry about it.

The important thing was the fact that no matter where Yuichi went, he still cared about him and that he never changed. Sensing their stable bond, unaffected by distance, a smile naturally came over Wataru's face.

"I probably shouldn't keep you too long. There were other things I wanted to tell you, but I'll e-mail you later," Yuichi said.

"Oh, okay. Sure."

"Don't talk in that voice. I won't be able to hang up."

After this teasing admonishment, Wataru heard Yuichi softly say "I love you." He whispered it so faintly it sounded like a trick of the ears, disappearing in an instant. Wataru answered at the same volume, "You too."

In New York it's...still nine o'clock at night. It really is the opposite side of the world there.

As soon as Wataru hung up, a brief sigh escaped him. The gabble of the surroundings had receded, but it closed in once again and Wataru felt as if he had suddenly come back to reality. It hadn't occurred to him until he felt it like this, but being far away from each other caused a fair amount of stress. Even though it wasn't stressful while they were on the phone, the sadness after hanging up was incomparably worse than normal.

Even though it's the same moment, we're seeing two totally different landscapes.

Still, Wataru was happy that Yuichi was being as attentive he could so that Wataru wouldn't get lonely. Wataru knew that revealing their relationship to Mizuho and expressing his frustration when he said "if only I was with you" were all part of Yuichi's kindness.

You stopped pretending, huh?

Wataru wished he could have seen Yuichi's face when he was caught out like that. Maybe he was so vehemently against that that he would have rather died than let Wataru see him, but Wataru knew it would have dispelled the stress of being at a distance.

But there's one more week before Kazuki comes back. "I'll be fine. This will get me through until then," Wataru murmured, and let his gaze fall to the ring he

wore in the place of a good luck charm. It had claimed ownership of the ring finger of his left hand and Wataru couldn't express how much courage the thing had given him in his time alone.

How girly. What am I, some innocent damsel? he mocked himself, but he was proud of being able to laugh. The pair of this ring glinted on the finger of his boyfriend with the same tenderness. Wataru knew that if it weren't for this love, he never would have known the joy of trusting so unconditionally.

Hurry home, Kazuki. I'm waiting for you.

Wataru closed his phone with this thought, then, holding his head high, he walked over to pick up his registration documents.

Kawamura's results were announced the same day as Wataru's, and he had also passed. They both cheered and swore to hold another celebration later, while that night Wataru sat down to a sumptuous dinner with his family. His little sister Karin scurried about cooking him all his favorite dishes; Wataru was especially moved at the special treatment he received when she left out the onions he hated but was always being nagged to finish. He didn't have any other preferences: onions were his pet peeve.

The next morning, Wataru slept late. As he went into the living room, Karin laughed, "About time, Wataru." He looked at his watch and saw that it was after ten o'clock, and his parents had already left for work.

"Shouldn't you be in school, Karin?"

"My school is having open exams today. It's gotten really popular lately and there's more people applying from outside the school."

The school Karin attended was an all-girls fast-track school from secondary school through college. It was popular in the area as a school for proper young women. Looking at his sister's coarse behavior, Wataru always thought, *She's hardly a lady*, but his friends always wanted to be introduced to her. He had decided that when they did that, he would tell them she looked exactly like him. They usually got a conflicted look on their faces and backed down. Even without the indulgent eyes of a brother, Wataru thought Karin looked pretty cute, but his friends' masculine hearts were not aroused by someone with their friend's face. Kawamura was the most conspicuous of these; though at one time he had talked endlessly about how much he wanted her, he didn't show the slightest interest in her anymore.

Though he did bug me about wanting to blind date Karin's friends.

Even a clown like Kawamura was devoted to someone now, a woman named Mitsuki, one year older than himself. He'd told Wataru pompously over the phone the night before that since he'd passed his exams free and clear, he could approach her without any reservations.

"Hey, what do you mean 'about time'?" Wataru asked as he passed the kitchen counter to open the refrigerator and take out some milk. "Was there something I was supposed to do?"

"What are you playing dumb for? You're going to

leave and move in with Kazuki, right?"

"Wha...uh, yeah, well...But Kazuki's in New York right now."

"Wataru, you are way too laid back. Even if you start looking now, there aren't going to be any good places left! All the students sweep into Tokyo in March. The really quick ones have their parents look for places before they take their exams."

"What, are you serious?"

"I don't care how much you were focused on your exam, you have *no* sense of survival. Our parents didn't really say anything, but they're going to give you money, right?"

Karin had struck a sensitive spot, knocking the words right out of Wataru. Last summer, Yuichi had broached the subject of living together, but after that, Wataru had done nothing aside from getting his parents' permission. He had stopped himself from getting a part-time job while he studied for exams and his savings weren't more than a thousand dollars. This was a huge difference between him and Yuichi, who had paid the deposit out of his savings account when he rented his apartment.

"Maybe you got more points with Kazuki. Mom seems to be a fan of his. Since it's Kazuki, maybe he's already arranged a place."

"You mean before he left for New York? But he didn't know if I'd get in or not."

"Geez, I already told you, it's too late to say that! Oh, poor Kazuki. He's going to have to take care of an idiot like you from now on."

"Hey, who's an idiot?"

"You are. Fits you perfectly, doesn't it?"

"Why you...!"

Karin sat on the sofa with both knees drawn up to her chest, smiling innocently as she watched Wataru get annoyed. Seeing her carefree demeanor, Wataru was suddenly struck by sentimental feelings. He and his sister had always gotten along well together, probably because ever since they were little both of their parents had worked. Reliable Karin had stood in for their mother and taken care of the chores, and though she was the younger sister, sometimes she spoke to Wataru as if she were older.

But no matter how tough her personality was, she was still a little girl and Wataru knew that she hated to be by herself. So when he went to live with Kazuki, that meant she would have the hardest time of anybody, being all alone in the house.

Though she's been so obsessed with her new hobby of metalworking she hasn't even realized that herself.

As he drank the milk, Wataru let his mind wander. *That'll be so sad.* Years ago, back when he and Karin still had an antagonistic relationship, Yuichi had said that Wataru had a sister complex. But only now did Wataru realize that he couldn't deny that accusation.

"Wataru? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Oh, uh, I was just thinking how right you were. I'll go see a realtor this afternoon. I can't do *anything* until Kazuki comes back, and now that I'm free again I want to go outside."

"What? It's so creepy when you listen to me. Did

your brain turn into mush after you passed, Wataru?"

Wataru instantly regretted being cowed by his own little sister. As he left the living room, she called out cheerfully behind him, "Good luck!" and she laughed.

Man, I can't believe Karin. When did I ever think she was cute?

When Wataru got back to his room, he sat down on his bed irritably. It would bug him to go out and apartment hunt after Karin had told him to, though he didn't have any other plans for the day. *I'll get dressed, anyway*, he sighed, and as his eyes moved over to his desk, he noticed the new message light on his cell phone was blinking.

Huh? Did I get a text message?

When he picked up the cell phone, it looked as though it had just arrived. His heart thrilled with the possibility that it was from Yuichi and he quickly opened his inbox.

"I knew it."

He'd spoken aloud despite himself. The message was one of Yuichi's regular e-mails. While he was in New York, he went to the hospital before noon and then, depending on Mizuho's condition, he would stay a long time or retreat early, depending on how she felt that day. But he would send a message almost every day before going to the hospital.

I really am jealous...just a little. But I'm the one who told him to go.

It was no good getting so somber, so Wataru rallied

his spirits and started reading the message. The writing was crisp, as always, and the purpose was covered concisely, which was very typical of Yuichi.

"Congrats on passing, Wataru. I'm thrilled, too. I checked out a place beforehand, so if you get some time please go take a look at it. I already talked to a realtor about leasing it if you like it. This is the contact info. They're closed today, so go tomorrow."

A place? Wataru read the line over and over, gaping.

Somehow, Karin had guessed right. Wataru didn't have to wonder: Yuichi had already found a good place and had even done the background work on it. Wataru looked at the phone number at the end of the message, and then sat back down on his bed, dazed.

What the heck, Kazuki? You could have mentioned this...

Even as he was thinking this, his complaints trailed off. If Yuichi had brought up the subject of a new apartment while Wataru was facing down the exams, it would only have added to the pressure, so all Yuichi could do was act in silence. His studio was too small for them to live there together, and like Karin had said, starting earlier significantly broadened the selection for living conditions and rent.

Oh well. Even so, he did wait until after I'd passed.

It was easy to sulk and get upset, but Wataru didn't want to act childish. The brusque text was part of Yuichi's personality and Wataru knew he didn't mean anything by it. Yuichi's older brother Shohei was a first-

rate architect, too, so he must have had connections with realtors. Wataru was sure Yuichi had put that advantage to good use and found a great apartment.

Well...I wanted us to go round to the realtor's together. It might not have been so bad. And I was going to go out to look for something today anyway.

Wataru knew he was getting wrapped up in stupid details, but he couldn't deny that he felt like he'd dodged a bullet. *I've got to shift gears*, Wataru murmured, when suddenly the cell phone in his hand started ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Wataru? Thank you for your e-mail yesterday."

"Asaka!"

The instant Wataru heard Masanobu's voice, tension rushed through his body. Since he had been spacing out, he'd answered reflexively, but he regretted for the briefest moment not checking who the call was from.

Calm down-Just calm down. If you panic, he'll get suspicious...

The memory of what had happened the day of his exam resurfaced in Wataru's mind and he hurried to steady himself. He remembered Masanobu's pained voice, asking for only one minute of his time. A trifling request, like the ephemeral flurries of snow.

Wataru had wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible, but the memory of being held in Masanobu's arms had frequently come back to him, leaving Wataru flustered. No matter how he tried to seal it away, he remembered the sensation of Masanobu's arms and

the heat of his body. At that moment, Wataru had been incapable of pushing him away. And while Wataru considered himself a coward for that, he realized that he couldn't leave Masanobu so cold-heartedly. He didn't want to cause Masanobu, who was seeking a momentary embrace, any more pain.

But those feelings were for that moment only. And I thought Asaka understood that...

Just as Masanobu had promised, after one minute, he had released Wataru and thanked him. Had Wataru been mistaken in interpreting that to mean it was all over?

"Um—th—thank you for going to the trouble of calling me," Wataru said.

Masanobu pressed ahead, not showing any concern, as if he had anticipated this awkwardness. "Congratulations on passing. I was very grateful that you told me."

"Oh, no—you helped me, after all. I'm sorry for letting you know with a text message."

"Well, I suppose it's only natural. It's fine, don't worry. You don't have to apologize."

Masanobu's easy laughter continued to the end, pulling Wataru along until his own expression softened. The way Masanobu created an atmosphere that made other people comfortable always rescued Wataru. If he didn't keep his guard up, he felt like he would accidentally slip away in Masanobu's kindness, which came through even on the phone.

Careful, careful! I have to stand even more firm while Kazuki is gone!

Wataru tightened his grip on the cell phone and steadied himself once more. Masanobu could probably tell everything that was going through his mind. When he thought of that, Wataru's chest ached sharply with guilt. Since Masanobu had told him "I'll stay in Japan until Kazuki comes back," which was extremely suggestive, Wataru couldn't react in a way that gave Masanobu the slightest hope.

"This is hard. I just wanted to congratulate you," Masanobu said, just as Wataru expected. The reason Masanobu didn't sound embarrassed was because he was being as careful as he could not to hound Wataru. Wataru got his breathing under control, and then spoke, careful not to let any emotion creep into his voice.

"Um, really-Thank you for calling. When I'd hit a wall in studying, your methods and books helped out a lot."

"If you're going to credit me with all that, would you mind if I said something a little selfish?"

"Huh?!"

Masanobu's question was completely unexpected and Wataru's painstakingly composed emotions threatened to collapse. His reaction was so honest that this time Masanobu's laughter was tinged with sincerity.

"Don't get that upset. I'm not planning to call you out and knock you down or anything."

"I didn't think you were going to do *that*!"

Wataru realized that he was too self-conscious and his face reddened. *I'm glad we're doing this over the phone*, he thought, sitting up straighter, feeling almost rebellious.

"What did you want to say?" Wataru asked. "You can tell me. I really am grateful to you, Asaka. It's just, I've been...surprised by things recently."

"Good, you're finally more like your old self again. I've been worried that all that stuff about me studying abroad has confused things. This is a bit sudden, but do you have some time today?"

"Today? Uh, sure. I don't really have any plans."

Wataru recalled that Yuichi's e-mail had said the realtor's was closed for the day. He was a bit shocked by the timing. Looking back, Masanobu had always appeared at the most opportune moments. Whenever Wataru was flustered or had a shock, Masanobu was beside him, in a purely natural course of events.

"Then can we meet at one o'clock? I want to explain things better this time, and I'd like to celebrate you passing face-to-face."

"We don't really have to celebrate..."

"I'll try not to keep you long. My little brother is getting on my back about everything."

"He is? Oh, I'll bet he's making a huge fuss."

Masa'aki worshiped his older brother so much that he had seen Wataru as a threat because of the special treatment Masanobu gave him. The official reason for the delay was that Masanobu's request to reject the job offer had not been acknowledged by Yuichi's older brother Shohei. So Masa'aki was consumed with anger at him, too.

I can just picture it. Wataru smirked, and he consented to meet with Masanobu.

Asaka's right. I need to get the story about him

studying abroad straight, and me passing the exams is something else entirely. He did a lot of good for me, so I have to thank him properly.

After hanging up the phone, Wataru realized he was making all sorts of excuses and he felt mortified. When he thought about it, he had been goaded by Masanobu and it seemed likely that there would be more troubling developments to come. Reflecting on the pattern to date, Wataru berated himself, *You really have to grow up a little.* And to make matters worse, he didn't want to cause Yuichi any unnecessary worry when he was so far away.

One o'clock at the usual coffee shop.

Wataru glanced up to check the clock on the wall and saw there was only an hour until then. He stood up quickly and hurried out of his room to get ready.

"Um, Asaka..."

"Hm? What's wrong, Wataru?"

"Well, I should ask you that. Is anything wrong?"

Wataru wanted to lean toward Masanobu and press more out of his aloof expression, but the tight seatbelt wouldn't allow it. As he sat in the passenger seat, Wataru frowned. All he could do was stare up at the winter sky as it flowed past.

"I suppose all I can say in response to that question is, 'I'm sorry,'" Masanobu said with a defiant look on his face, as if he were admitting to a prank. "But I was a little reluctant to talk face-to-face at the coffee shop. It seemed like it would get awkward. And anyway..."

"Hm?"

"That place is important to you and Kazuki, right? I thought it might be better if you don't have any memories of me there. So I came up with that idea on my own."

"Asaka—" *You got me*, Wataru thought. He doubted that a clever person like Masanobu had missed the fact that Wataru couldn't react forcefully. It just meant that Masanobu should have picked a different restaurant in the first place if he wanted to be that considerate. Masanobu had been the one who told him to meet "at that coffee shop," but now Wataru was caught in a trap.

Oh well. I wonder where he's taking me?

The temperature was low, but the sky was pleasantly clear, and if this were a regular drive it would be a pleasant excursion. But, of course, Wataru couldn't relax enough. At a loss for words, he listened to the music on the car's CD player.

It's not really "selfish" to get together at a coffee shop in the first place.

At the coffee shop, they had drunk some tea and exchanged small talk and congratulations on passing the exams. But as Wataru braced himself, expecting Masanobu to come to the point of the meeting, he had instead asked, "Shall we go?"

Wataru had gaped, then hurried after Masanobu as he took the check. He was surprised to find the familiar station wagon parked outside. Masanobu said, "I'm sorry, I want to go somewhere else. Could you get in?"

There had been no time to ask where they were

going as he was guided into the passenger's seat. And even though there was no need to take the car if they were just going to "go somewhere else," Wataru had gotten in without much of a fight.

Maybe I really am an idiot. I could be kidnapped so easily.

Wataru thought it was bizarre, but by the time the car had pulled onto the freeway, he still hadn't asked Masanobu where they were going. But then, Wataru finally realized what Masanobu's goal was, and he berated himself, *How careless can you get?* But he had never imagined that Masanobu would act so forcefully.

Come to think of it, he did kiss me and suddenly started talking about studying abroad, so he can do surprising things sometimes, despite how level-headed he looks.

Wataru had gotten peeved at Yuichi when he'd identified Masanobu early on as a "dangerous man," because it seemed so unfounded, but Wataru finally understood.

"Wataru, you'll be able to see the ocean on your left soon."

"Huh?"

"We're in Hayama. The ocean is beautiful in the winter."

They had driven for about an hour when Masanobu suddenly pointed out the window. Wataru followed his finger and, between the buildings, he caught sight of the glittering horizon, bathed in afternoon sunlight.

"Ah! It's the ocean! Wow, I haven't seen it since I was in Okinawa!"

"That's a little more than six months, then. It's not as clear as in Okinawa, but it's not bad."

"Were you planning to take me here the whole time, Asaka?"

"Yeah, I was," Masanobu said, nodding freely as he pushed a button on the CD player with his left hand. "I wanted you to hear me out away from our usual scenery."

Wataru said nothing.

"That was the 'selfish' thing I mentioned. But don't worry, I'll turn around soon."

Masanobu laid a weighty implication in the words "turn around" and turned his eyes serenely toward Wataru.

The song Masanobu had selected brought a woman's sweetly whispering voice to the speakers. The airy rhythm and foreign lyrics stole any sense of reality from Wataru, and each time they went around a curve, the approaching ocean and the ice blue sky made him less and less sure of where they were.

What is Asaka thinking?

No matter how much Wataru thought about it, it seemed unlikely that he would reach any conclusions. He squinted against the sparkle off the water and behind closed eyelids, he imagined Yuichi, for whom night time was fast approaching in New York.

As he stood on the sand, Masanobu began speaking into the ocean breeze. "I haven't entirely given up on going to America or on studying abroad."

“What?”

“I told you how my plans are on hold, right? I just rushed through things before and didn’t explain very well, so I wanted to sit down and really talk to you. I’ve made some revisions, but I’m going to fly over first to check into things on the ground, and then when I know where I want to study...then this summer, I’ll officially leave Japan,” he proclaimed, his voice firm enough to challenge the wind that flapped against his coat.

Standing beside him, Wataru momentarily forgot the cold and stared at Masanobu’s determined profile. After a while, Masanobu turned a smiling gaze on Wataru and his eyes seemed to ask *Aren’t you cold?* Wataru shook his head and the corners of Masanobu’s mouth lifted in relief, and he turned his eyes back to the horizon. A quiet moment, the likes of which Wataru had forgotten in the midst of exams, settled slowly over them.

“What did you do the week before the results were announced?” Masanobu asked.

“Well...the exams were over, so it went by really slowly. No matter what I did, I couldn’t settle down, and I didn’t really go out much. I watched TV at home and I went to school, but it didn’t feel like I was really taking the classes anymore.”

“I see. And yesterday?”

“Yesterday? Um...after I saw the results, I wrote to everyone and then I went to report it to the school. I had a nice dinner with my family that night and...that’s it.”

Wataru found it odd that Masanobu was asking him about this, and then, as if he had read his mind,

Masanobu spoke. "I go to Shohei's office constantly. He called me over there for a week straight."

"For work?"

"As his excuse, yes. But it was really to persuade me to stay. It's only natural that he was unhappy. Many people apply to his company, but they never take new graduates. Then, the first one they did hire declined the offer. It's unbelievable. There's more than a year before I would start working for them, but if I don't make it clear early, they might miss some other incredible talent, right? That's how I thought of it."

"So your study abroad—?"

"Of course I told them. That's what convinced them I was serious," he replied readily but dully. When they talked together in a place like this, Masanobu's eyes often revealed melancholy. Wataru felt as if he had been saved, somewhat.

"Shohei was very angry. Well, not angry *per se*...it would be more accurate to say he was sulking. But no matter what perks he offered me, it didn't affect my decision. By the time you adjust to being a college student, Wataru, I probably won't be in Japan anymore."

"I see..."

"Are you sad?"

Masanobu's face was suddenly closer when he asked that. His sweetly handsome face was as charming as ever, and if Wataru had been a girl his mind might have frozen at that point.

"Yeah, I'm sad."

It was his honest, unexaggerated feeling, so he



didn't try to hide it. When Masanobu had declared his intention to study abroad over the phone, it somehow never seemed real. But now, Wataru keenly felt the fact that he would really be leaving.

It hurt him that he couldn't respond to Masanobu's feelings because of everything going on, but Masanobu was still his upperclassman. He had earned Wataru's respect, so Wataru couldn't help but be attracted to him, in a different way than he was attracted to Yuichi. Masanobu was more insightful than anyone, self-confident but not sarcastic, and despite that, whenever he looked far into the distance, a hopeless solitude fell over him. Facing a man like him, Wataru could never say "I'm not sad," even to spare his feelings.

"Thank you, Wataru," Masanobu said and smiled, and in that moment Wataru felt as if the crashing of the waves grew gentler.

The short February day was turning toward evening already and their shadows stretched far across the beach.

"That's what I love about you," Masanobu said. "Everything shows on your face so you can't lie, and you try to take as much responsibility as you can for what you say. It may seem simple to you, but not many people can do that. So if you tell me something, I believe it. If you say that you feel sad, then there was some value in my meeting you. Don't you think so?"

"Value"? But I've said a bunch of times, you helped me out a lot, Asaka."

"I didn't think I helped you that much."

"But you did. I took advantage of you without

meaning to. Now I know it's not the same thing at all, but when I first met you, you reminded me of Kazuki. At first, Kazuki wasn't nice to me at all, so I thought how you treated me would be how it felt if Kazuki ever treated me normally. It was rude of me to think that, though. It was very selfish. I'm sorry."

While Wataru was talking, he lost track of what he wanted to say and in his fervor he even hung his head. Masanobu listened in silence, letting out a rueful sigh that sounded embarrassed.

"So I...helped you, huh? Well, if you feel like you owe me, does that mean I'll see you again?"

Masanobu faced the sky, which was darkening to a grape-dark purple. It was not an indirect request, but rather the first straightforward demand he had made.

"Wh-See me?"

"I won't have many more opportunities to see you and talk to you like this, Wataru."

Wataru was speechless.

"When Kazuki comes back, I'll go to New York to do my groundwork. After that, I don't think I'll have much time left after the study abroad preparations. In any case, I think you'll be busy beginning your new life. That being the case, I only have this time right now to see you."

What Masanobu said was reasonable, but Wataru couldn't just nod and accept it. When Masanobu saw that Wataru was stumped for an answer, he brightened his tone slightly. "I bet Kazuki said to stop seeing me, right? And I'm not suggesting that we get together so I can make a pass at you. Besides, unrequited love isn't

such a terrible feeling. When I told you I was happy to have been able to fall in love with someone, I wasn't being a sore loser at all."

"I never—"

Just as Wataru was about to say "I never thought you were," a sea gull screeched overhead. He called to his friends, who chorused from every direction, echoing forlornly at the evening sun as it sank. His impetus lost, Wataru left the rest unsaid, and could only gaze back at Masanobu awkwardly.

"We should go back. I promised I wouldn't keep you long."

"Okay..."

They would never find a common ground on the most important thing, no matter how much they talked. Wataru knew that, but he followed Masanobu, unable to resist.

"Well, if you feel like you owe me, does that mean you'll see me again?"

Wataru wondered how he would have responded if Masanobu had forced him to answer that. Would he have flatly rejected him and said "I can't be alone with you," ignoring everything Masanobu had told him? Or would he have justified it by saying that there were only a few days left before Yuichi came back, and smiled as he had before?

I'm horrible.

Wataru could do neither of those things. Maybe he was indecisive, but he just couldn't reach an answer. Wataru finally felt like he understood how conflicted Yuichi must have been when he got the letters from Mizuho.

But Yuichi never showed that conflict in front of me. He didn't cause me any anxiety because he'd already made up his mind. Even though a guy as nice as him couldn't have found out about Mizuho's wish and not felt conflicted.

Compared to that, Wataru felt that he was a terrible coward for not flatly rejecting Masanobu. Wataru still struggled to find an answer as he gazed at Masanobu's back, walking ahead of him.

"Wataru—"

"Er—uh, yes?"

Masanobu looked back over his shoulder suddenly. His eyes contained a powerful resolve as they turned on Wataru, as if they had cast something off.

"Will you give up feeling guilty?"

"What?"

"It was my selfishness that forced you to come here with me, so you don't have to blame yourself. Once I've enjoyed my unrequited love just a little more, I'll withdraw gracefully. So I want you to drop your guilt, since there's no point to it."

"A-Asaka—"

"It's the same as pitying me. I'd be much happier if you were more rebellious and went back to being your old self. It's all right. I'm not childish enough to be that conceited."

Masanobu grinned as he said this, exactly the same as when they'd first met. Back then, Wataru had known nothing about the loneliness or the trauma Masanobu carried inside; he had only admired him for being so incredible, and those feelings reawakened inside him.

Many other memories of that time came into Wataru's mind, like Yuichi's jealousy and his annoyance at how unguarded Wataru was, and how he had been able to break through Masanobu's shell because of that.

"I understand," Wataru said, before he could even consider it. His lips chose his answer for themselves. A moment later, Wataru stood up straight and faced Masanobu with all his heart, filled with a resolute spirit. "I'll stop thinking about all these difficult things, too."

"Good. Now I can invite you out again."

The frozen ocean breeze thawed suddenly and grew warmer. Wataru prayed that this choice was the right one.

I wonder what happened, Wataru thought, confused. But all he heard from the other end of the line was an oppressive silence.

"Kazuki? You sound strange...is something wrong? Are you tired?" Wataru asked, rallying, but the only answer he got was a curt "It's nothing."

Wataru got home from the seaside and had dinner with Karin, and then by the time he'd taken a bath, watched TV, and gone back to his room, it was eleven o'clock. He checked his messages and found nothing, but then he remembered that he needed to reply to Yuichi's message from that morning to tell him he would go to the realtor's tomorrow. Within five minutes of sending his reply, the phone rang. They usually communicated mostly through e-mail, so Wataru was thrilled to be able to hear Yuichi's voice again so soon after getting his exam results.

But Yuichi was acting strangely. Normally, they would flare to life over the subject of the apartment they were going to rent, but no matter what Wataru talked about, Yuichi only answered in grunts of "Yeah," or "Up to you." He seemed disinterested in everything.

"Come on, something's up. Just tell me. Don't try to hide it."

Wataru didn't want to be too persistent, but there was a distance between them, making it hard to tell what Yuichi was thinking. Wataru gently kept at it, and finally Yuichi fell silent.

"Kazuki? Are you there?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about something. Wataru I have to go to the hospital soon."

"Wh—But you—"

"Mizuho asked me to go shopping for her today."

It was night in Japan, but in New York, the day had just started. When Yuichi mentioned the hospital, Wataru couldn't say any of the selfish things on his mind and he forced a cheerful tone so Yuichi wouldn't realize how depressed he felt.

"Oh—well, thanks for calling. I'll e-mail you about the realtor's."

"Wataru—"

"I'm glad I got to hear your voice for a little bit. It's good that you're watching out for her, but be careful you don't exhaust yourself. I heard it's colder there than in Tokyo, and if you're sick in bed, I can't go visit you. Take care and come home soon."

"Yeah, that's true. I will."

Wataru was frustrated by the sensation that despite

Yuichi's perfunctory response, there was still something he wanted to say. He thought of still pestering him about it, but he didn't want to have a fight on an international phone call. Since Yuichi had made the call, rather than sending an email, he must have had something to say, but since he wasn't broaching the subject, there was nothing Wataru could do. He waited hopefully for several seconds, but it seemed useless to expect anything, so he finally hung up the phone.

Something really must be wrong. If I'd forced it, he might have said something...No, with Kazuki's personality, he wouldn't have. But it worries me.

None of it was straightforward, so Wataru tried e-mailing Yuichi about something safe. But as he had feared, no matter how long he waited, no reply came from Yuichi.

Kazuki...

If Yuichi had been nearby, Wataru would have been able to go over to his apartment; it would have been possible to just look into his eyes and talk. Since Wataru's exams were over, there was nothing weighing him down anymore, and he was confident that they could soon resolve any stupid misunderstandings.

But all of that depended on Yuichi being nearby while in reality, Yuichi was in a foreign country, fourteen time zones away. Popping over to see him was nothing but a fantasy. If Yuichi hung up the phone, that was that, and Wataru wouldn't be given any time to talk.

We're going to be living there together. There's a lot I wanted to ask him.

Caught up in an unknowable sadness, Wataru gently squeezed the phone that never rang.

The next afternoon, Wataru called the realtor Yuichi had told him about, and then went to a building in front of the train station. The company was part of a major chain and had rented out the entire third floor of the building. It dealt with a range of properties, for individuals as well as businesses. Wataru had always had an image of realtors as existing for the common people. The office was so stylish it could have been a café, and he quickly lost his nerve.

Uh, I am in the right place...I think. The name is right—Wernatse.

He ruminated over the letters detailed onto the automatic doors, and then hesitantly stepped inside. This was the first time he'd rented an apartment, and his nerves were making things even worse. The counter at the front of the office that had "Information" printed on it seemed unreasonably far away.

"Well, if it isn't Wataru. Why do you look so tense?"

"Huh?"

"Over here! I'm disappointed you didn't come over on your own."

"Shohei?"

The cheerful voice was indeed Shohei's. He was sitting in one of the consultation areas that dotted the room. Wataru was impressed by the composition of the scene, which was straight out of a well-drawn picture or the cover of a foreign intellectual magazine.

Shohei waved him over. "I've been waiting for you."

"What?"

"Just kidding. This company handles a property my office designed. I have a meeting about it today. But news of your success has reached even my ears, so I thought I might see you soon. Yuichi told you about this place, didn't he?"

As usual, Shohei was superbly skilled at figuring things out. Wataru wondered what Shohei hoped to accomplish by seeing him, but he knew it couldn't be anything good, so he just smiled cheerfully and didn't dare confirm or deny anything.

"Oh, I forgot the most important thing. Congratulations on getting into M University."

"...Thank you."

Shohei motioned for Wataru to sit beside him, oblivious to his abrupt manner. The person Shohei had come to see had gotten up and he wanted to distract himself until they came back. Wataru hesitated a moment, but surely even Shohei couldn't be too cruel at a place of business. Steeling himself to survive a few minutes, Wataru accepted and sat down on the leather couch.

It's sickening how artistic he looks.

Wataru couldn't help but admit that much, though it pained him. Shohei wore a high-quality suit that fit him perfectly and he was so at ease that he seemed to have come to chat rather than do business. With the laptop and documents spread out on the glass table in front of him, Shohei seemed to be going over plans for a game.

"Tell me, Wataru. You came here today to find an apartment to share with Yuichi, didn't you?"

"Y-yes, I did."

Shohei looked at him with a curious expression and a bully's toothy grin spread over his face. Wataru braced himself, sure he was in for it now, but he smiled back bravely.

"I had the exams, so Yuichi picked out a couple places for us."

"Then why do you look so depressed? You got into college and soon you'll be living with your lover. This should be a great time for you. You usually act happier than this."

"I *am* happy."

"Don't try to fool me."

Shohei's eyes narrowed with pleasure as he looked at Wataru, who was getting fed up. Wataru had never expected a conversation with Shohei to go well in the first place. All Wataru could do was close his mouth and simply focus on not making it worse by volunteering any information. Yuichi had been in a bad mood the night before and Wataru was reluctant to look at apartments by himself, but it would have bugged him if Shohei found out any of that.

Then—

"Did Yuichi call you last night?" Shohei asked casually, crossing his arms magnanimously, as if beginning a game. "He was in a bad mood, wasn't he? Am I right?"

"How do you—"

Wataru was surprised, and Shohei looked pleased by that. He explained himself immediately, without making an ordeal of it, as if to reward Wataru.

"Simple. You went to the beach with Masanobu

yesterday, didn't you? I told on you to Yuichi. It must have been so relaxing to go on a drive to the ocean to celebrate passing your exams."

"Y-you must have misunderstood. I just—"

"Masanobu seemed like he might lose it, but he never follows through," Shohei muttered meaningfully, ignoring Wataru's bewilderment. Then, moving his lips even more smoothly, he revealed his secret. "His little brother has been having a fit since Masanobu delayed his flight to America. Then, Masanobu went out on that drive. His little brother was upset at being abandoned and called him. A little while later he got a text message saying that Masanobu was with you in Hayama, but he'd be home soon."

Wataru was silent.

"He saw that and got even more upset, and right after that I showed up at their house because I had business with Masanobu. He turned the brunt of his anger on me, and had quite a few things to say. He asked me what I was going to do about it, since I'd let Masanobu turn down my job offer, so it was my fault his brother was at the beach with some little punk."

"Little punk? Masa'aki called me that?!" Wataru bristled instantly.

"No, I added that for dramatic effect," Shohei corrected off-handedly. Wataru was astounded that an adult would call him a dark-eyed kid or a little punk so easily. Besides, since Shohei had made the desperate move of telling on him to Yuichi, Wataru couldn't stop himself from saying something.

So that's why Yuichi was in a bad mood. I mean, of course he would be.

The mood on the phone had been so oppressive that Wataru hadn't been able to mention that he'd gone to the beach. He regretted it now, but it was too late. Plus, since Yuichi thought that Masanobu had already left for America, it would have been complicated to explain that he was still in Japan.

"He's indebted to you for letting him go to be with Mizuho, after all. I suppose he couldn't tell you not to see Masanobu since he's in New York visiting his ex-girlfriend. He should have cleared his mind before calling you...but he's still so young."

"Shohei!"

"Oh, did I upset you? But I doubt this will turn into a big problem for you two. You've talked it over, haven't you?"

Shohei was exactly right, but their current situation was too unstable. Wataru had never expected that he would be knocked so far off balance because he couldn't see Yuichi or talk to him. He wasn't even angry, because he was too worried about Yuichi. Yuichi had to battle his insecurity all alone in a foreign country, and he couldn't look flustered in front of Mizuho.

"Listen, Wataru. Why do you think I chose a day I thought you would come here to do my business?" Shohei asked smugly.

Wataru's confusion showed plain on his face. So Shohei really had appeared there deliberately. The day ought to have been memorable for Wataru because he was looking for a place to share with Yuichi, but first Shohei had caused the mood of last night's phone call and now he was spreading gossip.

We're not allowed to be happy about finally living together. Is that what this is?

Unconsciously, Wataru's right hand clenched into a fist. Their homosexual relationship was not something that he could loudly proclaim in public. It was difficult to ask for understanding from others and it took courage and resolve to reveal it to anyone. They still hadn't talked about it much, but that day would come eventually.

I get it. I know we can't just think about each other forever. But...

If Wataru listed every element that might lead to anxiety in the future, there'd be no end to it. That was precisely why every step he took with Yuichi beside him was precious to him, and every word they shared was dear. He could not allow that to be disrupted, not even by Yuichi's older brother.

"Shohei, uh..."

"You know, Wataru," Shohei interrupted, smiling and casually crossing one leg over the other, "if I really wanted to break the two of you up, I would use *any means necessary*. I conduct business here, so I could have them withdraw the property. I wouldn't even mind letting it slip about your relationship to your parents or ours to stop you from living together. You know that, right?"

"What—"

"But relax. I swear, I won't use any extreme measures like that. Do you know why?"

Shohei smiled as the terrifying words pelted down on Wataru's head. Wataru had paled, and he shook his head earnestly. Shohei had been blocking him this entire

time as if they were playing a game, so Wataru doubted Shohei would suddenly give him a glimpse of his true feelings.

Shohei gave a suggestive smile, then dropped his voice and murmured, "If I did that, Yuichi would never forgive me as long as he lives. That's why I won't do it."

"Sh-Shohei..."

"You have a little sister, so I'm sure you understand. It's incredibly painful to be loathed by family. I'm fond of him, more than anyone—But no, I'm saying too much. How about this: I wish him all the happiness I wish for my wife and daughter. And that means I can't force you to break up with outside pressure. If my efforts hurt him, they become utterly meaningless. Understand?"

"Maybe..."

Shohei sought Wataru's agreement, but Wataru had no way of answering. Seeing Wataru's confusion, Shohei burst out laughing, instantly reverting to his original persona as an enigmatic man.

"Well, I suppose that's enough of threatening a young man with a future for now. In any case, I think we both agree that Yuichi is not in a very good mood. If you're not careful, you might end up creating a rift."

"K-Kazuki won't stop trusting me just because I went to the beach with Asaka. It might put him in a bad mood, but if we talk it out he'll understand. Besides, I know that told me this because you don't think that telling on me is going to have any effect. So you just want to upset me," Wataru shot back. He straightened his spine defiantly, and Shohei's look changed at once.

"My, my." Shohei's shoulders shook slightly as he

fought back laughter, and he clapped Wataru freely on the shoulder.

"You've wised up a little, dark-eyed boy. Though maybe you weren't that dim to begin with. If you were Masanobu's lover, I would have been quite fond of you. Oh well. It's really too bad."

"Stop saying that word. It's so creepy hearing you say 'lover.'"

"That stupid rookie, spitting on our job offer. Us, of all people! What's so great about America?"

This last part was spoken almost under his breath, but just as Wataru had heard in the rumors, Shohei apparently still hadn't given up on Masanobu. In the end, no matter how he resisted it, Masanobu's will was the most important thing. There was no way that Shohei, who despised wasted effort, didn't know that. So why did he keep trying to win Masanobu over? Even if Masanobu was an amazing find, Wataru couldn't understand why Shohei was so obsessed with him.

"I apologize, Mr. Kazuki. I've kept you waiting far too long."

A middle-aged man in a suit hurried over to them from inside the office and apologized. Wataru took the opportunity to rise quickly from the couch and bow to Shohei.

"I'll get out of your way. Thank you for your advice," Wataru said.

"Did I give you advice? I don't remember."

"Please don't be so modest. I'll tell Yuichi all about Asaka later. Goodbye."

As soon as he'd spoken, Wataru turned his back

and strode over to the information counter.

No matter how often I talk to him, he's always bad for my nerves, Wataru thought.

Yuichi had been so thorough in his research that not only were there a number of apartments to choose from, he had also made the deposit so they could sign a contract immediately if Wataru liked an apartment. He'd written down his father's name in the guarantor's spot, so the leaseholder was effectively Yuichi Kazuki.

Somehow, with everything all arranged, I don't have a part to play.

Even inexperienced Wataru could guess why the realtors were being so accommodating. Yuichi had paid the deposit before Wataru took his exams, but it would have been difficult to hold a property for that long without connections.

Maybe that jerk Kazuki is defiant after all.

Considering his personality, Wataru would have expected him to instinctively avoid apartment hunting in the shadow of Shohei, their "lasbost." But instead, Yuichi had flagrantly exploited his older brother's connections. It could be seen as a pretentious act, but Yuichi seemed to be saying to Wataru that they had nothing to be ashamed of.

Anyway, I have to talk to my parents and give half the deposit back to Yuichi. Then I have to find a part-time job. I'll buy a job ads magazine on my way home. Then I have to pack, and...

When Wataru started thinking of everything he

had to do, his head started to spin. Wataru pumped himself up mutely while the realtor stopped the compact car they were in and the man behind the wheel explained that they had arrived at the first apartment.

"It's a thirteen minutes walk to the nearest station, but the payoff is that there's a park and a library in the area, and it's a quiet residential neighborhood. There's a shopping district in front of the station, so it's on your way home."

"Wow."

It was three stops from where Wataru lived, but it was located roughly in between M University and T University. Around it were stylish homes and low-rise apartment buildings built a suitable distance apart. A row of ginkgo trees lined either side of the sidewalk. It was a pleasant and calm atmosphere that Yuichi would like.

"Here?...Really?" Wataru murmured keenly as he got out of the car, exhilarated by the sight of the brown five-story building. It had been built only five years ago, with four apartments on each floor. The apartment they were seeing was a two-bedroom on the top floor with a good view from the balcony. The only flaw was that the rent was at the upper level of what they could afford, combined.

"Are all the rooms square?"

"Yes. It gets good exposure, too, and has soundproofing and a security system. Plus—"

"Wataru."

"Huh?"

Suddenly a familiar voice called Wataru's name cheerfully. Wataru turned his gaze back to the front

entrance and saw an impeccably styled young man standing with his back to the two heavy glass doors that stood open.

"Oh!"

Masanobu stood there, with his small head and intelligent, glinting jet-black eyes, which made him striking. His long, slender legs stretched from under his short cashmere coat and his sophisticated appearance pulled Wataru's eyes to him against his will. In fact, two young women leaving their apartment stopped, and then hurried away, their faces flushed bright red.

"What are you doing here, Asaka?"

Shocked, Wataru ran over to him, and Masanobu's face grew slightly troubled, looking apologetic.

"I'm sorry. I got a call from Shohei a little while ago, saying he'd run into you at the realtor's office. He said Yuichi got upset because Masa'aki said something stupid?"

"Well, not upset exactly. He's—But it's not anything you need to feel responsible for. It's fine, we didn't have a fight or anything. Did you come all the way here for that?"

"Well, Shohei said you were upset, too..."

While he'd been talking with Shohei, Wataru had been led into a trap. Masanobu let out a deep sigh and muttered in dismay.

"What is he thinking? I was completely frantic because I thought I'd caused a fight between you and Kazuki. Shohei told me where you were, and I tried to call a couple of times, but you didn't answer, so I decided to come."

"I'm sorry you went to all that trouble. You must be busy getting ready to go to America."

"Don't worry about it. If I look at it as saving me the trouble of inviting you out, it seems like good luck."

Masanobu grinned and looked much more cheerful than he had the day before. Wataru had been lost in thought in the car, so he hadn't heard his phone ringing from inside his bag.

So now I've done something bad, he thought, but when Masanobu called it "good luck," that made him feel petty. And since Yuichi was in a bad mood, it was even worse.

"Um, sir?" the realtor said. He couldn't grasp the situation very well and he interrupted with some reservation. "If you don't mind, I can show you the other rooms. I heard that you will be sharing the apartment, correct? So if you see it together, I can be much more helpful."

"No, I—"

Masanobu started to correct the man and explain that he was not Wataru's room mate—But his expression suddenly became mischievous, and he nodded elegantly, with a smile that seemed to confirm it all. "All right. Let's see it, then."

"A-Asaka?"

"Now, now. I'm not exactly ignorant about all this, you know. I'll give the place a good once-over in Kazuki's place, without cutting any corners. How's that sound?"

"How's it sound? Well..."

Ignoring Wataru's hesitation, Masanobu allowed

the realtor to wave him in and he preceded Wataru into the apartment. Wataru followed, hopelessly resigned to it, but as he went through the foyer doors, Yuichi's image pricked his heart.

Wataru couldn't count how much he had sighed since morning. Karin had chased him out of the living room because she said he was brooding, so he had opened his closet to organize his room for packing, but he couldn't summon the energy and only the clock made any progress as he stared blankly at his mountain of clothes.

Man, it's the weekend and everything! This is such a drag. And Kawamura's on some date, too...

Kawamura had been excited about going on his first date with Mitsuki, the girl he'd been after during the exams, and though Wataru envied his best friend, his self-pity seeped further into his heart. Sitting on the floor, Wataru felt forlorn and sighed again.

But, I can't really contact Kazuki. It's only been one day, but yesterday we left it on that awkward note...It keeps bothering me and I can't calm down.

Wataru sluggishly pulled out balled up shirts and winter jackets that he'd stuffed into his closet, and once again his thoughts turned to what he ought to do. It was unfortunate that Shohei's pettiness had exposed his trip to the beach with Masanobu, but Wataru had been dragged there against his will. Still, there was a lot Wataru wanted to apologize for. But in a situation where he couldn't call Yuichi first, he didn't have many options.

Why doesn't he call back? Did Mizuho get worse? It's been about ten days since the surgery, and Kazuki said that even if she seemed fine, they couldn't let their guard down yet.

If that were the case, Wataru couldn't nag him to call back, but he was the cause of the misunderstanding and he wanted to correct it as soon as possible.

Shohei had said that Yuichi was indebted to him for getting to see Mizuho. But in that case, Masanobu was indebted to Wataru, too. At least Yuichi had never kissed someone else and hadn't been seen doing it. Compared to that, Wataru was nothing but weaknesses. It wouldn't be unreasonable if Yuichi got fed up with him.

"Wataru, I'm going out to Toko's workshop, okay?"

After a knock, Wataru heard Karin's voice from the other side of the door. He realized how late it was, snapped out of his reverie, and quickly stood up. Every weekend Karin took lessons at a metalworking studio from three to seven o'clock. The instructor was Yuichi's cousin Toko, who had created Wataru's ring, and now she and Karin were as close as sisters.

"Take care. And say hello to Toko for me."

"Okay. Also..."

"Hm?"

Wataru opened the door and saw a little bit of tension cross Karin's face. On the surface, she was trying hard to look pleasant, but she seemed somehow uneasy and fidgety. He looked at her with concern, and she pointed hesitantly downstairs and quietly said, "You have a guest."

"A guest?"

Wataru peered down the stairs, wondering who it could be, but all he could see were legs in the foyer wearing second-hand jeans and sneakers. It was superficially casual, but that look took a lot of money to achieve. Wataru went pale, guessing who it was. Seeing his expression, Karin lowered her voice even more. "He's kind of hot, but he's scary."

"Scary?"

"He glared at me when I came to the door, and then asked for you," she said with pouted lips in disappointment. It was a way to appeal to him to do something. "Anyway, I'm leaving. I don't know what you did, Wataru, but no fighting."

"Uh, hey—!"

Karin pounded down the stairs, true to her words, and, after bowing quickly to the person in the foyer, she flew out of the house. Wataru was thunderstruck, but he couldn't keep the visitor waiting forever, so he braced himself and started down the stairs.

Wataru poured some coffee and returned to his room where Masa'aki had invited himself to sit cross-legged on his floor. He gruffly held out a cup and said, "It's just instant." When he did, Masa'aki lowered his head with unusual solemnity and his face became somehow awkward.

"What the heck? That's creepy. You've totally changed," Wataru said.

"I figured I did some bad stuff to you, so I...came today to apologize."

Masa'aki muttered his stuttering explanation while staring at the floor. Since he had displayed naked antagonism ever since their first meeting, Wataru doubted the motives behind those commendable words.

But it seemed that Masa'aki was being honest. His rounded shoulders made him look humpbacked, his posture reminding Wataru of a dog being scolded by its owner. When Wataru sat down silently across from him, Masa'aki finally lifted his gaze and looked deliberately at him.

"Apologize...to me?" Wataru asked. He couldn't avoid it, so he tried to make it easier for him and urged Masa'aki to continue. Masa'aki nodded reluctantly, his eyes sulking. Then he straightened his back, as if steeling his resolve, and spoke rapidly.

"I told a guy named Shohei all kinds of bad stuff, and I heard you and Kazuki had a fight because of it. As soon as Masanobu got home yesterday, he was really mad. He said I didn't understand the difference between what I can tell people and what I can't...but isn't that weird?"

"Isn't what weird?"

"Doesn't that mean that it's bad to tell people that he took you to the beach? What's so terrible about that? My brother just has feelings for you. It's not like you two are having an affair."

"Th-that's true, but—"

Wataru had no response to that perfectly reasonable opinion. He hadn't done anything to be ashamed of, so maybe everyone, himself included, was over-reacting. But in Masanobu's actions, there were hints of his true

feelings. That was why Yuichi couldn't ignore it and why Wataru cared more than was necessary. Everything was a ripple caused by Masanobu's involvement.

That's right...and then I give him opportunities because it's Asaka. When I think about how it must have hurt him when I turned him down...and even though I knew I shouldn't, my heart dulled. That's my weakness, it's not anybody's fault, but...

Finding out that Masanobu had lost someone important in the past had been Wataru's undoing. Realizing how much Masanobu struggled with that sadness had given Wataru pause several times. That was pity and it could never be replaced with love, but it was difficult to stay strong.

"Was Masanobu that upset?"

Wataru didn't want the incident investigated too closely, so he changed the subject. From the way Masanobu had come running to the apartment the day before, Wataru could imagine the attitude he'd had toward his little brother. Wataru had never seen Masanobu angry before, but despite his coolheaded ways, he was so rigidly straitlaced that Wataru knew it must have been pretty scary. Otherwise, Masa'aki never would have come to apologize.

"If so," Wataru went on before Masa'aki could reply. "Would you tell him everything's fine? Kazuki isn't really upset; we don't fight about every little thing."

"But I don't think you're exactly innocent."

"What, me?"

Suddenly the focus of Masa'aki's objection was

turned on Wataru and Wataru was flabbergasted. He had only been trying to follow the story.

It seemed likely that Masa'aki's true problem lay with him. Wataru set his coffee mug to one side and sighed at himself, exasperated at wasting all this time.

"Look, it's not like he asked me if I wanted to go to the beach with him. He just took me."

"I know. That's not what I mean. Masanobu has always makes things happen the way he wants. He comes off as easy-going, so it lulls people and before they know it, they're following his lead. It's amazing the way he does it."

"I think I see that."

In the renovation club Masanobu belonged to, that ability was called the "Asaka magic." When people listened to him talk, they felt like they could do anything. In fact, when feelings between Yuichi and the club members had been running dangerously high, Masanobu could settle it with only a smile.

"Yeah, he can definitely do that," Wataru said. "You can't resist him anymore, and you listen to whatever he says."

"Hey, listen up—my brother's not evil."

"I know that."

As soon as Wataru had thoughtlessly acknowledged his idea, Masa'aki snapped at him. Wataru supposed it was because he couldn't stand to have outsiders say they understood his brother. That sort of predictability was what Wataru despised in Masa'aki.

More to the point, if Masanobu was a villain, I wouldn't be this worried about it.

Wataru almost grumbled this aloud, but he quickly composed his expression. If he engaged Masa'aki in a pointless argument now, things would never improve.

"Look, Wataru."

It was still a little irksome when Masa'aki spoke to him so patronizingly, since he still wasn't used to it. He shot back a rude "What?" and Masa'aki went on, brooding. "Everything's messed up because you won't dump my brother once and for all."

"What?!"

Masa'aki seemed to have a sensitive tongue, because he hesitantly brought the cooled coffee to his lips and frowned. Apparently it was still too hot, and he gave up after barely sipping it and turned his gaze back on Wataru, who had fallen speechless.

"I bet he wheedled something good out of you at the beach, right? But that's just going to keep happening over and over again. My brother can't get you out of his head."

Wataru couldn't respond.

"You're special to him," Masa'aki emphasized the word "special," As he stared unblinking at Wataru.

"Am I wrong?" he went on. "You're the first person he's fallen in love with since Yuina. That means you've had a serious impact on him. When I came to Japan last time, I was shocked. He was almost suicidal, but now he's recovered. Well, 'recovered' might not be completely accurate, but close to it."

"Masa'aki—"

"It's like he's beginning to accept Yuina's death. That's how peaceful his eyes have become. Of course,

he's got his unrequited love for you, so in that sense he's unhappy. But he won't give up. It's like he enjoys being sad. Do you get it?"

Wataru didn't want to acknowledge that he did. But Masanobu had looked at Wataru with eyes that proved Masa'aki right. In fact, at the beach he'd even told him "I enjoy unrequited love." It was impossible to deny the fact that his joy at being able to love someone had given Masanobu new energy. That was why Wataru couldn't feel irritated by Masanobu's love.

"I hate to say it, because I've been so worried about him, but...my brother's wounds haven't healed."

Masa'aki bent his head to his coffee cup, now apparently at a temperature he liked, and took a sip.

"So no matter how much he tries to give you up, he can't do it. Just think about it. My hetero brother fell in love with you. That wouldn't happen normally. Would he be able to give up that love because he was dumped once or twice?"

"I—But—"

"I don't know what he told you at the beach, but don't get carried away. If you like my brother even a little bit, you have to do this. If you don't, he'll still have feelings in America. Then what's the point in being so far away?"

Wataru didn't have an answer.

"I don't want to see my brother like that. I want him to be the happiest guy in the world."

Masa'aki cupped the coffee mug in one hand, his voice rich with rare solemnity. Wataru couldn't think of any sort of response, so he only mulled over those

words, feeling pressured.

A love that would normally never exist. Could he give that up?

I...

When he tried to imagine himself in that position, he didn't need to come up with any answers.

"Look, Wataru. You don't have to be nice to him. In fact, it doesn't matter if you lie, so could you tell him you hate him? Masanobu told you how he only temporarily delayed going to America and that he's going to disappear from your life soon, right? But don't be fooled."

"Am I?"

"Yeah, you are. I mean, people's hearts don't just stop loving because it's time to. You're giving my brother a shot at making some memories with you, but it's only going to make his attachment worse if you're nice to him. That's what I think."

Wataru mostly agreed with what Masa'aki said, though some of what he said made Wataru's head spin. It was as if Masa'aki had taken the thoughts Wataru couldn't define and put them into clear terms.

"Wataru, you asked me before who told me that you and Kazuki were dating."

"Huh?"

"It was Yuichi's big brother. I showed up at Masanobu's job once, and he invited us to dinner. He just threw it out there, like it was just normal conversation. But I found out yesterday that he did it on purpose."

Wataru almost found himself saying "big surprise" aloud. At the same moment, Shohei's aloof face flashed

into his mind and he thought, *You think I'm going to lose to you?*

"Don't lose to him, Wataru," Masa'aki said without pausing. It was as if he had read Wataru's mind. "I don't really get the whole situation, but that Shohei guy is fishy. Plus he knows my brother really well. When I found out you had a boyfriend, I told Masanobu that since you didn't want him, he should go to America with me. But that just made him more determined to stay in Japan. He doesn't come off that way, but my brother is pretty stubborn. I wasn't thinking when I said that to him."

"So that's what happened."

"Because of that, he once told me he would never go to America. If that happened, I bet Shohei would be turning cartwheels. Because he wanted my brother to be his pawn that much."

Masa'aki seemed bitter about letting Shohei use him so masterfully and he drained his coffee peevishly. But then since talking with Wataru had sparked Masanobu's decision to study abroad, Shohei's scheme had backfired. That thought made Wataru feel a little gratified.

"From your perspective, I'm sure I seem like a kid following his big brother everywhere," Masa'aki murmured suddenly into the silence, toying with the coffee cup in his hands. "That's fine—Even I know I do that. But I know what my brother was like when Yuina died. That's why I'm worried about him."

"Masa'aki—"

Wataru couldn't say anything, but he felt that he

understood some fraction of Masa'aki's heart-rending appeal. Once, Wataru had gone with Masanobu to a concert, and later found out it was the anniversary of Yuina's death. After that day, whenever he looked at Masanobu, the man seemed driven by precarious feelings. Since he was like that even a year later, it must have been impossible to ignore him right after it happened. Usually, he was a perfect honor student and natural leader adored by everyone, but the danger was in the gap between that and his feelings.

"Hey Wataru: my brother didn't delay going to America because Shohei was griping at him, did he?"

"Uh, well, I don't—"

"I'm not stupid, you know. I guessed that much. When Yuichi went to New York, he couldn't leave you all by yourself. That's more Masanobu's personality than love. He's not the type of person who would take advantage of people."

"Yeah, I think so, too. Masanobu is an amazing person. I really respect him."

"Wataru—"

"But like I keep saying, it's not love. Yes—my eyes were opened when you told me that. I was afraid of hurting Masanobu and of being hurt myself. I didn't want to be the bad guy. I made excuses for myself, saying it might be all right since we weren't going to be together much longer."

Following Masa'aki's lead, Wataru drained his cold coffee and finally faced the reality he had been running from. Unless he took a resolute stance, he would never free himself of Masanobu's effect. That

was because in his heart, he felt guilty about being cold. But even if the result was hurting Masanobu, he had to put himself heart and soul into being the bad guy. Or better yet, he had to dump Masanobu so thoroughly that Masanobu regretted ever liking him.

"Thank you, Masa'aki. I feel ready now."

"I don't really want you to thank me for anything. I just want my brother to give up on you as soon as possible and find someone to be happy with. If possible, this time, uh...with a girl."

"Yeah."

"Uh, I-I'm not prejudiced or anything. I just think he'll suffer less that way."

The way Masa'aki hurried to make excuses brought a smile to Wataru's lips. Even Wataru would have a complicated reaction if Karin brought home a girlfriend, so he understood exactly what Masa'aki was trying to say.

"I, uh—I'm sorry about causing a fight between you and Yuichi. If things don't go well with you and your boyfriend, I'm out of luck. If you became single now, my brother would never come to America."

"Uh, well, that's not..."

"Be careful. Shohei might be trying for something along those lines. Especially since he's against you and Yuichi being together. If he managed to do it, he'd be getting two birds with one stone. Don't take your eyes off him for a second."

Wataru wanted to say "don't jinx it," but since he still hadn't heard from Yuichi yet, all he could do was play it off with a smirk. Throughout their conversation,

his cell phone had been plugged into its charger, but it didn't ring. Considering that, the signs were extremely discouraging.

But it's still the middle of the night over there.

Masa'aki declared that he was going home and Wataru saw him out the door, and then let out yet another long sigh. After he'd talked to Yuichi the last time, he knew he was sinking.

Attendance at school wasn't compulsory just before graduation, but Wataru still went almost every day. He had really liked the apartment he'd looked at and he wanted to formally lease it and start getting ready to move. But three days had gone by and he still hadn't heard back from Yuichi. He felt that he would get depressed being alone in the house, so horsing around with his upbeat friend in class distracted him.

"Hmm. But y'know, you only went to the beach cause he kinda tricked you. It's not like you cheated on Kazuki. I don't think it's really normal to get that upset about it. You think there might be something else going on?"

"Like what?"

"If you don't have any ideas, maybe it's something over there. Like with what's her name, Mizuho, the ex? Maybe they're having problems and he can't talk to you."

Wrapped up in his coat, Kawamura suggested these possibilities while he bit into a loaf of melon bread as they sat on the roof during lunch. He had always been

there with an encouraging word ever since the very beginning of Wataru's relationship with Yuichi, so his suggestions were strangely compelling.

"With the ex, huh? I can see it, but...I'd rather have him be mad at me about Asaka than that."

"Hey, hey! Don't get so depressed. It was just a theory."

"It's been three days. There've been times when Kazuki didn't call me before though, and they always turned out to be for really stupid reasons. So maybe I'm worrying too much this time, too."

"He doesn't answer his e-mail and his phone is turned off. Plus even if you called the hotel directly, he might be out and you wouldn't be able to get a hold of him. Hey, did his big brother say anything? Y'know, that 'Legendary Prince of the Student Council'? Do you know his number?"

"I thought I might ask him if I couldn't get a hold of Yuichi today. But you think he'd just tell me nicely?"

Shohei was an alum of Ryokuyo High School, the school Wataru attended, and his legend lived on with the student body for being the student council president who had laid the foundation for the current lax school rules. But Wataru didn't want to reveal any weakness to Shohei, so he didn't want to rely on him if he could help it.

"I wonder if something happened...between him and Mizuho..."

The fact that Yuichi hadn't contacted him meant Wataru would only picture extreme situations. Yuichi had worried more than anything about causing Wataru

anxiety by being away. That was why he had called Wataru so conscientiously and why he had told Mizuho all the details about them.

"Come on, cheer up. Even if the world turned upside down, that guy would never do anything to betray you, would he? He even glared at me that one time just for insulting you."

"Oh, uh, that was—"

Yuichi's desire to monopolize Wataru sometimes came out in surprisingly childish ways. Wataru interrupted, quickly trying to follow up on that, but Kawamura squeezed his melon bread for emphasis and went on.

"I know. Yuichi Kazuki fools the whole world with his prince act, but I know he's really a nefarious fiend whose only desire is to monopolize you."

"Hey! That's going a little far—"

"Even if he's distant in front of everyone else, his head is full of your happy-go-lucky smile. They didn't know it, but at the graduation ceremony last year, the girls were all sobbing before it even started, and he just walked past them with an apathetic smile."

"Well, I guess, now that you mention it..."

A year had passed. *And so many things have happened since then*, Wataru thought despite himself. His heart swelled with emotion before Kawamura's words brought him back to reality with a jolt.

"You're so blasé about it. You might not know this since you went straight home after the ceremony, but there were even throngs of girls from other schools outside the gates. It was a huge deal."

"Huh?"

"There were flowers and presents and letters, and they were all addressed to Kazuki. He managed to disappear at some point, and it got even rowdier. It was a pretty good time," Kawamura said enthusiastically. Yuichi had slipped out of the school and gone to wait for Wataru, and then the two had gone for a walk under the earliest cherry blossoms. Wataru had been considerate and gone home early, intending to give Yuichi time to say goodbye to his friends and mentors, but Yuichi had seen through those feelings.

"Can you believe we're the ones graduating this time?" Kawamura asked.

His tone changed abruptly and he spoke with unusual sentimentality. He was moving on to a different college and when Wataru thought about how they wouldn't be able to see each other all the time anymore, he became emotional as well.

"Hey, Kawamura—thanks for everything."

"What the...?!" Kawamura's eyes went round with disbelief at Wataru seemingly thanked him for no reason.

"Uh, I just mean, for me it's—How can I put it?"

"Is this about Kazuki? You're only now thinking to say that? Besides, you worked really hard at it, too. You plan to help me out from now on?"

"Huh?"

Kawamura's response was unexpected and Wataru was surprised. They'd had funny or joking conversations before, but that was the first time Kawamura had ever been serious talking about Wataru's romance with Kazuki.

"It would be rough even if your boyfriend was just a boy, but he's a defiant, twisted guy. 'Oh, I'm not nice,' 'I say mean things.' Plus he's all mixed up in stuff because he's so popular. I bet that's super stressful. But you never lose hope. I never saw you trip up over Kazuki even once. That's pretty awesome, right?"

"Kawamura—"

"If it's weird that I'm not prejudiced, then you better be more confident. People might call you guys 'homo' or 'queer,' but I want to support you 'cause you try so hard. You're my friend, right? That's all this is."

Kawamura laughed in embarrassment, thinking, *And I'm only now saying that?* and he popped the balled up melon bread into his mouth.

"Graduation, huh..." Wataru murmured. Kazuki's love wasn't the only thing Wataru had gained during his senior year of high school. Wataru smiled brightly beside his best friend.

"Huh? What does that mean?" Wataru asked. The words came out reflexively, shaking with an almost pitiful degree of anxiety. He held his cell phone tightly against his ear, held his breath, and waited impatiently for the answer. But the silence only went on, until it seemed the answer would never come. Finally, he could bear it no longer and Wataru pressed forward himself.

"Kazuki, don't just sit there: talk to me. What do you mean you can't come back?"

"It's not that I *can't* come back. I said I might have to delay my return flight."

"But why?"

Wataru's voice became harried by his impatience with this conversation that kept dancing around the central issue. He had been momentarily relieved when Yuichi finally called him back, but then it had been impossible to stay quiet when he heard such shocking news.

When night fell, Wataru had tried calling Yuichi, steeling himself to call Shohei afterwards if it didn't work. Yuichi's phone was on, but it went straight to voice mail and Wataru couldn't reach his boyfriend. Unable to hide his disappointment, he had left a message saying he wanted Yuichi to call him back, and then Yuichi had called him surprisingly soon after that.

I haven't heard his voice for three days, and now he says he can't come home?

Wataru tried to make his mind work, but his thoughts wouldn't come together. An inadvertent sigh was so faint it seemed to fade as soon as it was out of his mouth, and Wataru grew sadder. Right after Yuichi had flown to New York, he had told Wataru not to worry about anything, but now his words brought nothing but anxiety.

"Listen, Wataru—" Yuichi broke the silence, sensing Wataru's silent protests. "The reason I called tonight is because I was thinking that we need to sign the lease on the apartment soon or we won't get it. Your e-mail said that you liked it, too, so can you wrap things up with the realtor?"

"For the apartment lease?"

"Yeah. They can't hold it forever. And we have to move, too."

"Are we...going to live together?"

"Hey."

This time it was Yuichi who seemed harried by Wataru's unthinking question. He had been holding back his emotions until then, but his tone quickened suddenly.

"Just hold on a little longer, Wataru. That's why you went to look at the place, right?"

"But you said you weren't coming back yet! You haven't called me and you're getting into a bad mood now without telling me why! I'm tired of it. I've been depressed the last couple of days because of you."

"Wataru..."

"At first I thought you were angry at me because I went to the beach with Asaka. But that seemed really strange. I didn't know what else it could be, so I've been wondering what caused this."

As Wataru spoke, his emotions reached a crescendo and his tone became unintentionally accusatory. He hadn't wanted to fight on an international phone call, but when Yuichi had told him "I can't come back," his self-control had gone off the rails.

"Just talk to me, Kazuki. If you don't, I—"

"You're not the reason that I didn't call. There's been a slight problem here."

Yuichi's voice was slightly hard as he answered, trying to soothe Wataru's excitement. If only Wataru could see Yuichi's face, he would be able to read the deeper meaning in his eyes, but as it was, Wataru couldn't help feeling fed up.

"Is it about Mizuho? Did she take a turn for the worse?"

"No, it's nothing you need to worry about. More importantly, can you take care of the stuff with the apartment?"

"I can, but...when are you coming home, Kazuki? At first you said you were staying there for two weeks."

"I'm sorry...I still don't know exactly."

Wataru was struck speechless.

Why not? he wanted to counter, but he remembered that Yuichi had already told him, and a strange fatigue discouraged him. Since Yuichi hadn't told him any details so far, it would be pointless to ask anything now. Even so, he couldn't just hang up. No matter what had happened, he wouldn't be the one to say "I've had enough," because he had no idea when he would hear from Yuichi next.

I can't believe I've started worrying this much...

Wataru didn't want to regret that he'd pushed Yuichi to go to New York. That made him realize that there was nothing he could do but wait obediently for Yuichi to come back and not ask pointless questions. Since Yuichi was being so vague, Wataru could easily imagine that it had something to do with Mizuho. But he felt that forcing answers out of him because of his own jealousy would only deepen the gulf between them.

Gulf? What gulf?

Wataru was astonished by the word he'd chosen. Yuichi had told him to move forward with their plans to live together and even asked him to make the preparations for moving, so why had he thought of a gulf? Even if Wataru didn't know why Yuichi was delayed, he knew Yuichi was definitely coming home.

And like Kawamura had said, it wasn't as though he suspected that Yuichi would betray him.

But still...

Intangible doubt after intangible doubt closed off Wataru's heart. As uncertainty was filling Wataru's mind and he considered trying to get the reason out of Yuichi by any means, Yuichi's voice trickled into his ear.

"I heard Asaka delayed going to America."

"Wh—"

"He found out I left you behind to go to New York, so he stayed in Japan, right? I heard from my brother. I've been horrible to you lately. I never thought that he would get the jump on me celebrating you passing your exams."

"And I'm sorry for not saying anything."

Wataru felt as if the normal Yuichi had returned. Once Wataru had apologized, Yuichi immediately responded with a joking, "Then that's that." Feeling rather relieved, Wataru searched for the right words to not destroy the mood they had just worked to create, but Yuichi spoke first, sounding uncomfortable about breaking the silence.

"Wataru, I...I love you."

"What?"

"It's true. I've said it a ton of times before, but I really do love you. You're more important to me than anything and I never want to let anyone else have you. I want to be with you for as long as you want me."

Wataru's confusion was stronger than his joy at this sudden confession. After he'd heard that Yuichi was delaying his return, all of his sweet words had seemed

like nothing but hints of something else. Wataru couldn't be really happy until Yuichi was back in his arms and his whisper of love dampened his skin. He did not voice these feelings and, just as he'd feared, Yuichi let out a strained sound.

"But...I'm sorry. I can't be with you right now. No matter how much I want to see you, I can't go home yet."

"It's...it's no big deal. I'll be waiting for you, Kazuki! So..."

"Thanks. I'll try to come home as soon as I can. And don't you let your guard down until I get back."

"Let my guard down? Against what?"

Wataru realized that Yuichi was referring to Masanobu and he was immediately seized by bitter feelings. No matter how much Yuichi trusted him, he didn't like Masanobu being so close to Wataru. Unlike Mizuho, Masanobu had a record of impulsively kissing people.

Though when we talked at the beach, I didn't take it like that.

But Wataru soon corrected himself. Hadn't Masa'aki come just the day before to question him? People's hearts did not change easily and it was extremely selfish to wish that Masanobu would give up.

"I have to go soon," Yuichi said as if to change the mood, sensing something in Wataru's thoughtful silence. "It was a little long for an e-mail, so I actually wrote you a letter recently. I wrote about putting off my flight home. I sent it by express air mail, so it should get there today or tomorrow."

"You wrote me a letter?"

"Yeah. I'll be checking my mail every day, so write if you need anything. I'll call you again when things calm down. I've had my phone off a lot, but you don't need to worry. Trust me whatever happens, okay?"

"Okay, Kazuki."

In the rush of hanging up, Wataru was beset by melancholy.

"Um, also..." Wataru started.

"What is it?"

"Just, uh—I'm waiting for you," Wataru said and then paused. "I'm waiting till I can see you again."

It took a lot just to say that and Wataru prayed that the trembling in his voice wouldn't betray him. Yuichi started to say something, and then laughed faintly. With a brief "Okay," he hung up.

I can't believe he's postponing coming back.

As Wataru's room returned to utter silence, he murmured absently to himself. When they hung up like this, he was left all alone and no matter how he scanned the area, he could detect no trace of Yuichi.

I wonder what's going on. What on earth is Kazuki doing?

Though they were apart, the thought that Yuichi was sharing in the same sadness made it possible to bear. When Yuichi was by himself, he was also alone, and when Wataru wished he could see him, he believed it was Yuichi's heart calling out to him.

Those feelings still haven't changed.

Yuichi said he'd sent a letter. Once Wataru read it, maybe his doubts would be cleared up. But he was somehow afraid of getting it.

The next day, Wataru waited until noon to get himself ready. He had school that day, but he had more important business to take care of. The night before, after Yuichi's call, Wataru had been unable to sleep. He'd thought to himself, and the result was that he would start doing what he could on his own.

"Hello, is this Masa'aki?"

The last thing Wataru did before leaving the house was to call the number Masa'aki had given him the other day. He learned that Masanobu had been called over to Shohei's office that morning and that he probably wouldn't be back until later.

"What's up, Wataru? You finally get what I was telling you? That's it, isn't it?"

Masa'aki's excited questions sounded like an interrogation to Wataru. He must have sensed something from Wataru's decisive tone. For the guy who had been so abusive to Wataru when they'd run into each other at the library, Masa'aki's behavior was unexpectedly similar to that of a friend.

Wataru answered Masa'aki's question ambiguously, then steeled his resolve and left the house. If Masanobu was at work, Wataru would have to wait, but if the timing wasn't just right, his feelings would collapse. If only he had made arrangements to meet up beforehand! He decided to wait somewhere until Masanobu went home.

Why should I care how long I have to wait? If I hesitate now, I'll have to start all over again.

Refreshing his motivation, Wataru took out his phone as he walked. When he next spoke with Yuichi, he

wanted to have taken one step of progress.

Not again, Masanobu's glare seemed to say, but Shohei didn't care at all. He smiled back innocently and Masanobu let out a short sigh, as if he'd expected that.

"There aren't many people here for a weekday. Is something going on?"

"They're at a presentation. We ought to win it, so there's no reason for me to go."

"I see."

With a dramatic air, Masanobu looked around the otherwise empty office and then back to Shohei. Shohei had a good idea of what Masanobu was going to say next, but he'd wanted to see Masanobu and decided to wait in silence, since he gave the same dutiful answers every time.

"I've asked you this several times," Masanobu said.

"Hm?"

"Please make this the last time you call me out here when there's no urgent work to be done. I don't have time to waste."

"Your preparations for America are going steadily along, eh?"

"Shohei..."

Shohei had touched a nerve and Masanobu closed his mouth, troubled. He had never imagined that Shohei would try to hold him back this much. He had given Masanobu the pretext to be by Wataru's side, so he may have wanted Masanobu more grateful, but Masanobu

was stubborn. He would never let his guard slip because he had been fooled into playing along with Shohei's games. Since Masanobu had done everything Shohei had hoped, Shohei wished he could keep Masanobu close at hand.

"If you don't have any urgent business, do you mind if I excuse myself? I don't think I'll be able to make you see my side of things, and I have many preparations to make."

"You really are so conscientious. Even when you know I have no work for you, you still come when I call you. Were you perhaps hoping that I would corner you with another brilliant story?"

"What?!"

Masanobu's anger flared and Shohei took the cigarette he was smoking from his lips and grinned.

"If I did that, you wouldn't have any choice but to withdraw from your study abroad and stay in Japan."

"Shohei!"

"You could stay with little Wataru, and it would be all my fault."

Masanobu started to object without thinking, barely restraining his anger. But he had decided it was useless to get angry at Shohei's handiwork, because it never slackened. He abruptly turned his face away and after several breaths, regained his usually cool composure. Then he turned slowly back to Shohei and began speaking smoothly, his tone very different.

"Shohei—will you make me a deal?"

"Well, now."

Now we've come to the point. Shohei's heart leapt.

Masanobu wasn't his assistant just because he looked good: he knew exactly what to say to hook Shohei's interest.

"Please think of my study abroad as an investment. I'll come back as a more experienced specialist than if I stay and work here for the same amount of time. I'd like to work with you in this field, Shohei. That hasn't changed. So please, if you believe in my future, give me some time. In exchange, I promise to be useful to you."

"That's a lot to ask."

"It's important to build up experience in the workplace, but I realized that there are still things I want to learn overseas."

So please, he thought, alluding to his well-known humiliation with a firm gaze.

"I don't want you to be my matchmaker with Wataru," Masanobu said.

"Really?"

"I'm just indulging myself while Yuichi is in New York. I'm not qualified to hope for more than that right now. I've already discussed this with Wataru."

Shohei said nothing, but Masanobu finally smiled an honest smile. Shohei brought his cigarette back to his lips and took a deep drag. Masanobu was asking Shohei to invest in him. But then Shohei would have to wait an unknown number of years. However, Masanobu was declaring that he would be worth it in the future.

Well, I suppose an honor student knows how much he's worth.

Masanobu was the same type as Yuichi: a man blessed in looks, brains, and sensibility. Plus, he had

the confidence and the means to enjoy it. The fact that Masanobu was more than simply a good kid was what had caught Shohei's eye, but it was a relief that Masanobu hadn't gone crazy, even if he had fallen into an unattainable love.

This kid is getting years ahead of himself to ask me to wait for him.

Shohei exhaled the smoke and looked down at Masanobu in silence. There were very few people who could meet Shohei's powerful gaze and not be swayed by it. Masanobu was one of that small number and Wataru was another. Despite how naive Wataru looked at first glance, he was reckless enough to always challenge Shohei head-on. Shohei laughed at the memory of it.

"Shohei?"

"Oh, it's nothing. All right—I understand. I'll think about it."

"You will?"

Masanobu's expression brightened instantly. Shohei had never listened to him in the past, so what he said was real progress. When Shohei saw how happy Masanobu looked, he understood that he truly had decided to study abroad. Of course, Shohei had never thought that Masanobu was the type to change course depending on the person he'd fallen in love with. He hadn't simply been stifling his desire to go abroad before.

"Incidentally, what is Wataru up to?"

Shohei shifted abruptly to ask this and Masanobu's smile sank into shadow while he fell into a troubled silence. But Masanobu knew he wouldn't be allowed to

get away with that. He sat down at the desk he had been given and looked back at Shohei with faintly peevish eyes.

"Why do you ask all of a sudden? I haven't seen him, so I don't know."

"That's so cold. Haven't you called him?"

"I've been...busy lately."

Masanobu's voice was suddenly weaker and he dropped his gaze. Shohei couldn't believe that this was the same man who had tried to make a deal to provoke him. How much did it take for a person—for Masanobu or for Yuichi—to open their eyes once they'd fallen under that kid's spell?

Well, I have to admit, he's an interesting guy. But not very sexy.

Wataru's features were cute enough, and he had a tough spirit and a quick wit. Normally that wouldn't be enough to make men fall, but these two were under his spell.

I don't get it. This is the biggest mystery of my entire life.

Shohei stubbed out his cigarette with a disapproving frown and took a packet of foreign cigarettes from his pocket. He didn't smoke in front of his beloved daughter, but he was a chain smoker of many years. The number had gone up sharply once he'd started his business, and it made his wife, who hated the smell of cigarettes, frown at him.

"For some reason, I feel very insecure all of a sudden," Masanobu said.

"Why so?"

"It's Wataru. I haven't seen him since the day I followed him to the apartment."

Masanobu smiled, his eyes troubled and his words faintly self-mocking. He had a lot of pride, which clashed with his gentle exterior, and there were few people he would reveal his weaknesses to so meekly. Shohei sensed that he was one of these people and felt some pride that their relationship had grown to that point.

"Insecure? When did you ever feel secure enough to dump that kid?"

He lit his cigarette with a snap of his silver lighter, and he drew the smoke in deep. The lighter had been a gift from his wife, which he'd used as a tool when he'd given Wataru a "declaration of war" in Okinawa. Not even a full year had passed since then, which he found difficult to believe.

"I'm sure you'll laugh at this, Shohei. I didn't think I could stay here with this one-sided love. At least now I have absolutely no chance. The more I push, the more Wataru pulls away."

"That's pretty naive of you. Are you planning to squander your love as well as my job offer, Masanobu? If you were satisfied with unrequited love from the very beginning, then don't bother the kid by saying you love him. That sort of assertive affection is a burden for the person you like."

"That's pretty harsh," Masanobu murmured, his smile fading, as if no answer was possible. Then he folded his arms and looked up at Shohei, who was leaning on his desk, with brooding eyes. "But you're

completely right. I went to see Wataru after I got a call from you at the realtor's office. Then I helped him look at the apartment...and I guess you can imagine how that turned out."

"You helped look at the apartment? Are you crazy? Is that why you've been depressed?"

Shohei flung abuse at Masanobu out of surprise, but Masanobu's face looked like he had been expecting it. He was no doubt painfully aware that he had acted stupidly.

"That's where Wataru and Yuichi are going to live together. That was masochistic, no matter how you look at it. And I'm sure it bothered the kid that you did that, since you're in love with him despite his boyfriend."

"You're right. If Yuichi heard about it, he might not want to live there anymore."

"Masanobu..."

Shohei saw what the problem was and felt a fair amount of shock at how out of character Masanobu was acting. Masanobu went on defiantly, as if baring his soul had lightened his burden a little.

"To be honest, I think I wanted to be a little mean. I knew Wataru wouldn't know how to deal with it and I practically forced my way through the door. I brought this depression on myself."

"You, mean? That's a word that hardly suits you."

"Don't turn this into a joke."

"But it's true. You never think of people who take the high road as being mean to anyone on purpose. I don't think you've ever experienced any setbacks in your life aside from Yuina's death. Could the Masanobu

Asaka who's walked with his head held high in the sunlight actually be dragged down by this kid?"

Shohei blew out the smoke in slow amusement, smiling meaningfully at Masanobu, who wore a complex expression. Shohei took the cigarette from his lips and swooped down to bring his face closer to Masanobu's.

"Look. You're way more attractive now. You're just barely missing it."

"My looks have nothing to do with my ability to do my job."

"Oh really? Good looks are an effective weapon for anything. More so because your rival in love is Yuichi. The level is higher, but nothing you can't handle. I may be his older brother, but he's pretty tough. He doesn't have any excessive baggage."

"Excessive...baggage?" Masanobu's eyes clouded with suspicion. "What does that mean, he doesn't have any excessive baggage?"

"It means that Yuichi has no feelings except his love for the dark-eyed kid."

Masanobu said nothing.

"He would probably do anything for that kid. He might even throw away his pride. He gives Wataru a hard time so he doesn't figure that out, but he can get as underhanded as me, and then he becomes truly heartwarming."

"It's because of the way you talk that Yuichi doesn't like you."

After a modest counterattack, Masanobu looked away from Shohei. He looked like he was thinking about something, but finally an inexplicable hue came into his

eyes and he asked, "Sometimes I can't tell anymore. Do you actually want to break the two of them up, Shohei? It doesn't seem like it, somehow."

"I told you before, I want Yuichi to walk a path where the sun can shine on him. A homosexual lover is a hindrance to that, so it's better to separate them. I don't have any particular grudge against Wataru, and Yuichi has even changed since he's known him. I think very highly of that."

"But if you just didn't worry about what the world thought—"

"Is that how *you* feel, Masanobu?" Shohei turned the question around immediately and Masanobu's expression distorted in surprise. Shohei didn't get many opportunities to witness this youthfulness on Masanobu's face. If Masanobu had let Wataru see that, Shohei thought he would have had a much better chance of winning the kid over.

"Masanobu, forget about going to America and finish off your studies at T University. Then come here next spring. If you plan to work on Wataru over time, it's more beneficial to do it from nearby, right? Those two are going to start losing the zest of romance now. Living together will cause more problems and when Wataru's environment changes, they'll have more misunderstandings. They're both going to be changing."

"Shohei—"

This was apparently something that Masanobu also had misgivings about and a tremor began in his resolute eyes. But they quickly came into focus, with

no openings to take advantage of, and he answered decisively.

"Unfortunately, I don't have the patience to wait for two lovers to break up and watch it all while pretending to be their friend."

"What a way to put it."

Shohei dropped the second cigarette into the ashtray, his eyes daring Masanobu to continue. The fact that he could answer readily at a time like this testified to how distinctive Masanobu was.

"I thought they ought to break up once," Masanobu revealed without the slightest enthusiasm. "It seems I was more in love with Wataru than even I realized. But if things stay like this, I know I would end up hounding him. I want to put some distance between us and think things over so that doesn't happen. I want to think about the way people love each other, and about my own future."

"Oh, I see."

"You're not laughing," Masanobu observed with surprise. His face was steeped in innocent love and was extremely beautiful. In his heart, Shohei grumbled at how strong the dark-eyed kid was not to fall for this, and then answered with his unusual frankness.

"No, I'm not laughing. Now, why do you suppose I called you here today?"

"Huh?"

Masanobu wondered why Shohei was bringing this up now. Shohei paused for the space of one breath, then told him the news he'd kept in reserve.

"The fact is, Yuichi has postponed his return. He

would have been coming back about now, but he's not and I'm sure Wataru is very shocked by it. I only found out last night, after all."

"Really? But why?"

"There have been some problems over there."

"He postponed..."

Just as he'd expected, Masanobu's color changed completely and he fell silent. *Any minute now*, Shohei thought as he glanced at his watch and imagined the scene that was about to begin.

Yuichi really gave me an amazing upset here.

The night before, Yuichi had called from New York and told Shohei that he was postponing his return and that he'd already told Wataru about it. So that morning, Shohei had called Masanobu and brought him down to the office even though there was no work to be done.

If Shohei's guess was correct, Wataru had heard where he was from Masa'aki and he would be coming there. He would decide that since Yuichi's behavior was unusually ambiguous, *he* at least had to make his attitude clear. And he would come to tell Masanobu of his decision as soon as he could. Shohei was sure Wataru would only be thinking of lessening his debt to his lover a little in the hope that he would see him again even just one day earlier.

I sure am glad that kid is so easy to read. He's the impulsive type who acts as soon as he makes up his mind about something.

Masanobu had wanted to leave Japan peaceably in order to avoid a decisive separation from Wataru, and

he would most likely take a lot of damage. There was no way Shohei would be absent after predicting these developments.

Oops.

As he was thinking that, a cell phone suddenly began ringing. Whichever phone it was, it had to be the dark-eyed kid.

Since Masa'aki had told Wataru that Masanobu was at work, Wataru hadn't expected Masanobu to answer his phone. But a few minutes later, Wataru saw Masanobu hurry out of the building where Shohei's office was and Wataru felt bad. *I must have interrupted his work.* He had been prepared to leave a message on the voice mail then go and kill some time until Masanobu called back, but they were meeting only five minutes after he'd called.

"What's wrong, Wataru? You don't usually call me."

"Uh—I—I'm sorry. I was planning to wait until you were done with work."

"Don't worry about it. Shohei was just trying to persuade me to stay, as usual."

Masanobu stood in front of Wataru, his breathing slightly faster. When Wataru realized how Masanobu had rushed outside, he felt that what he was about to do was even more cruel.

It really is horrible. But I have to push ahead and not be afraid.

Even after reassuring himself, Wataru's smile was

still strained. Masanobu must have misinterpreted it, because his eyes suddenly softened and he asked gently, "Did something happen with Kazuki?"

"N-no. I didn't come today for advice, I...I came to tell you something."

"Oh?"

Masanobu was obviously shaken. *Was what I said that unexpected?* Wataru wondered, as surprised as Masanobu. *Or maybe there's some other reason,* he thought, when suddenly Masanobu smiled at him.

"It's a little hard to talk in a place like this. Do you want to go to a coffee shop?"

Masanobu had surmised from Wataru's hardened expression that it wasn't going to be a fun talk. His voice tended to fade a bit, but Masanobu spoke without losing his smile.

"I don't mind, but aren't you cold out here?" Masanobu asked.

"Um, well...if there's somewhere more private we can go, all right."

"Wataru, what are you—?"

"I want to talk without worrying about who might see us."

As Wataru gazed back into Masanobu's eyes, he pulled both hands out of his coat pockets and balled them up tightly. No matter what happened, he hoped he would be able to get all the way to the end of what he had to say. With that hope, he had worn the pair to Yuichi's ring, which he had never done in front of Masanobu before.

"So let's move over here a little," Wataru said.

Picking up on Wataru's determination, Masanobu walked in the direction he'd indicated. There was a narrow alley just next to the building with a spot that was conveniently blocked from view. The two moved over there and faced each other once again. Neither of them could speak right away, and Wataru searched for the best word to begin with between their tense gazes and the awkward silence.

Asaka is very insightful, so he probably knows what I came here to tell him. But still, he's waiting quietly for me. So I have to say something...

Yuichi's confession of the night before echoed in his ears: *I love you*. Wataru didn't know the circumstances that had made him postpone his return to Japan, but Yuichi wouldn't say he loved Wataru just to get out of an awkward situation. Wataru had been dismayed, and Yuichi had broken into his inscrutable conversation to tell him that almost sadly; that was how Yuichi supported him.

"Um, Asaka, I..."

It was okay if it was faltering; it was okay if it was childish. He just had to push ahead. The pounding of his heart threatened to give him vertigo, but Wataru closed the distance between himself and Masanobu desperately.

"Uh, the fact is I—"

"I heard Kazuki postponed coming back to Japan?"

"Wh—?"

Wataru's racing heart stumbled slightly at these unexpected words. Before he could ask how Masanobu

knew about that, Masanobu went on, his eyes pained.

"I heard from Shohei just now. I don't know what happened, but are you all right?"

Wataru was silent.

"W-Wataru?"

"Oh, no, I...I'm fine. I got a call from Kazuki and he told me he would be coming back later, but to trust him and keep waiting. I was pretty upset, so he was worried about me. But I'm actually fine. Hey, we even decided to rent that apartment you saw. So I've been keeping busy."

Wataru struggled not to let the anxiety he felt inside show on his face and he controlled his voice. He didn't think that would fool Masanobu, but he expected it would at least communicate the idea "stop being nice to me." If Masanobu understood that Wataru wasn't just saying it out of pride and that it was what Wataru wanted, he thought that Masanobu wouldn't push any further, since he already respected Wataru's feelings.

"I see...Well, as long as you're all right." Though he seemed slightly confused, Masanobu answered kindly, his smile never faltering. He remained still, and Wataru could tell that he was confused by the impression that Wataru had drawn a line somewhere.

"It would be nice if Kazuki came home soon," Masanobu said.

"Asaka—"

"I said I would stay until he came back, but I think if I make that promise again, it might be really hard to keep it. I wish he'd come home soon, for my sake."

There was no sarcasm in his voice: Masanobu

spoke his feelings honestly. But when he offered to make a new promise, Wataru decided that if he was going to bring the subject up, it had to be now.

Before Wataru could even speak, Masanobu had realized what Wataru was going to tell him. The reason he didn't beat him to it, Wataru thought, was probably because he wanted to get away from these inescapable feelings, too.

"Asaka, the reason I came here today is—"

"Let's shake hands."

"What?"

"Shake hands. Remember? I went to your meeting spot to serve in Kazuki's place. You listened to me in the park and the rain started falling partway through."

"...I remember."

Wataru nodded and looked at Masanobu earnestly, remembering the park soaked in the early summer rain. Masanobu had told him about his past for the first time and when they'd parted, he had shaken Wataru's left hand. Those painful memories swept into his heart vividly.

Wataru had said goodbye that day, too. The word had hinted at a new bond being born between them, but it was completely different this time. This was the real meaning of "goodbye."

"Asaka..."

"Yeah?"

"I wondered this back then, too, but why did you shake my left hand?"

Masanobu had put out his left hand so naturally that Wataru had responded the same way, but it had always

mystified him. Now, facing their final handshake, he wanted to know why that was, since it was so indelibly linked with Masanobu in his mind.

"You wear the ring that matches Kazuki's on your left hand. See, I hid your left hand so that the members of the renovation club wouldn't start asking questions. The first place I ever touched you was your left hand, Wataru. That's why."

Wataru couldn't say anything to that.

"Would you let me end things today shaking your left hand? But..."

"But?"

"I know this is selfish of me...but would you take off your ring?"

Because it would hurt to have this memory punctuated like that, Wataru couldn't avoid hearing the rest of his reason for asking.

"All right. Just a second."

Apologizing to Yuichi in his heart, he slipped the ring off his finger. In that moment, a variety of emotions welled up inside him, but when he considered that his bond with Yuichi was etched into every part of the ring, he decided it really was best to take it off.

"Oh..."

Wataru started to put it into his pocket, but he was so nervous that he dropped it on the asphalt. Masanobu quickly stooped and picked it up a moment before he could.

"Oh—I'm sorry, Asaka."

Masanobu didn't answer.

"A-Asaka?"

Masanobu had fallen silent, as if lost in thought about something, and he stared at the ring. His eyes were covered with sadness, the same kind that had filled his eyes when he had told Wataru about Yuina. Wataru's heart squeezed tight and he became afraid of the stream of cruel words he would have to say. If he was ever in this same position, and he had to hear Yuichi break up with him forever, he didn't think he would be able to stay so calm.

"Asaka, um..."

But if he avoided causing a temporary injury, it would only make both their wounds deeper. Wataru fired himself up and tried hard to remember Masa'aki's words and Yuichi's sighs.

"Um, I...what I wanted to say is that—"

"What would you do if I said I wouldn't give this back?"

"What?" Wataru asked, not comprehending the sudden question. "If you didn't give what back? Asaka?"

"This ring. If I told you I wouldn't give it back, what would you do then?"

"You wouldn't!"

Masanobu lifted his gaze from the ring, and that look told Wataru that Masanobu himself was deeply conflicted by his own question. It was a precious treasure, symbolizing his bond with Yuichi. How much of his pride had Masanobu had to sacrifice to suggest that he wouldn't return it? Wataru's heart ached just imagining it.

I can't do this anymore, Wataru thought.

He didn't want to make Masanobu wear this expression again. Even if Masanobu hated him for it, there was no option but to cut away those feelings with his words.

"Asaka..."

"What?"

Sadness lingered in Masanobu's clear eyes, as if he knew what was coming.

Be brave, Wataru murmured to himself and he met Masanobu's gaze head on.

"You and I can't—"

Masanobu looked at him.

"We can't see each other anymore—"

Before Wataru could reach the end, Masanobu's powerful arms closed around his body. Masanobu wanted to delay their separation a little longer by holding Wataru in his arms. His strength was overwhelming—yet extremely delicate.

"You don't have to say it, Wataru. I understand, so you don't—"

"We can't see each other anymore. I'm sorry, I can't see you anymore. I'm sorry!"

As Wataru repeated the words over and over, his voice became choked with tears. He could only barely stop the drops that had formed at the corners of his eyes, but each time he said he was sorry, they threatened to spill down his face.

"Asaka—I'm sorry."

"Be quiet."

At last this pained request slipped from Masanobu's lips, sounding as if it had been squeezed

from his soul. The sound pricked at Wataru's ear, carving an even greater pain into his heart.

"It's okay, Wataru. You—you don't have to apologize."

Masanobu let out a deep sigh after saying this, at his very limit. However, the instant Wataru started to indecisively put his words back together, his lips were covered, sealing them in.

"Mmph—nngh—"

Unable to comprehend what had happened, Wataru was kissed again and again. The memory of Masanobu seizing his lips once before reawakened inside Wataru and the harshness of it threatened to shatter his heart.

"Nngh—mmph!"

Wataru was overpowered as soon as he resisted, and his writhing tongue was wet with sin. Their mingling breath was shrouded in immoral passion, and it sank deeply and sweetly into his lips, pulling sadness in with it.

"L-let...let me go—"

Masanobu caught Wataru's body in his arms again as his legs threatened to collapse under him. Wataru squirmed desperately, still struggling to escape his hold, and no matter how many times he was kissed, he never succumbed. This wasn't like before; if he showed even the slightest weakness, he would hurt Masanobu. More than that, he never wanted to do anything that would keep him from meeting Yuichi's gaze again.

"Please let go of me!"

The moment Masanobu pulled away, Wataru took aim at the slight opening and let loose his final attack



on Masanobu's heart. Wataru didn't turn away from the brief flinching in Masanobu's eyes; he declared, without any sympathy, "I'm not going to see you again, Asaka."

"Wataru—"

"Please don't call me or e-mail me again. It bothers me."

Even though he was ready for it, when Masanobu's eyes snapped open in surprise, it made his heart ache. He apologized a thousand times and more in his heart, but not a word of it aloud. Wataru coldly declared, "Thank you for everything."

Masanobu was silent.

"Goodbye."

Wataru turned around and ran away, trying to get away from Masanobu as quickly as possible. His legs had only now begun to tremble and his body burned with regret and desolation after its contact with Masanobu's heat.

"Kazuki...Kazuki! Kazuki!"

Wataru kept calling out Yuichi's name, as if throwing himself on its strength and he ran, in shambles. The chill wind robbed the faint warmth from his lips, but the echo of the sensation didn't fade.

"Kazuki! Why aren't you here right now?"

In the silent emptiness, Wataru turned his tearful eyes up to the clear blue sky.

"Oh, I see..."

He whispered the words unconsciously. Just then, the moon was shining in the sky over the part of town where he was.

After Wataru ran away, Masanobu couldn't move for a long time. He had been told they would never meet again and that their bond was severed, but it simply didn't feel real. So until he realized the fact for himself, he couldn't take a step in any direction.

"Oh, no—"

Masanobu noticed something and opened the fingers of his right hand and stared mutely down at Wataru's ring. He'd forgotten to give it back, he realized, but he didn't know what to do. How was he supposed to return this to someone he couldn't see anymore? Feelings of dismay enveloped Masanobu and his brain refused to work at all.

"Hey now, how long are you planning to goof off over there?"

"Huh?"

A terribly familiar voice tugged him back to reality. When he sluggishly lifted his gaze, he saw that Shohei had arrived without him noticing and stood there without his coat on.

"Shohei...how long have you—"

"You were taking so long, I came to find you. I didn't say you could go home yet."

"I-I'm sorry. But I wasn't goofing off, I was—"

The moment Masanobu started to shove the ring into his pocket, he was assaulted by a powerful sense of guilt. He had cast aside appearances and his pride to follow the dictates of an impulse, and had forced a kiss onto Wataru. He had promised Wataru that he would never do anything like that again, but he had violated that. He felt as if he had become a villainous person and

that stole his words from him.

"I was—I was—but—"

"Masanobu..."

As Shohei approached, the power slipped from his voice. It was bizarre to see him faltering over something, but finally he said in a low voice, as if thinking aloud, "If I were you, I would have kissed him, too."

"Wh—"

Masanobu looked at Shohei in surprise to see the man silently seeking his agreement. Masanobu was confused and he felt his cheeks grow warmer, which was completely out of character for him.

"Uh, Shohei—"

"No, you probably *had* to kiss him just then."

"Y-you saw?"

"No, all I saw was the dark-eyed kid's back as he was running away. But even a fool could guess what happened with you standing here looking so pathetic."

Masanobu couldn't be sure if Shohei was telling the truth or not, but it didn't matter anymore. The essential thing was that someone understood what he'd done. If he had only been able to blame himself for acting stupid, he would have repeated that attack again in the future. It was almost impossible for him to console himself.

"I've been dumped," he confessed honestly, struggling to smile a little for Shohei. It ended in failure, but Shohei didn't pay it the slightest attention. He came straight at Masanobu to stand directly in front of him and inquired offhandedly, "Oh, were you?"

"Yes..."

"But you're such a nice guy."

"Please don't look so serious when you say that."

"Why not?"

"You'll make me laugh," Masanobu answered a small smile breaking onto his lips. *Good, I can still smile*, he thought, and the next moment his every thought swelled as one and seemed to overflow until it broke his heart.

"Shohei, would you...turn around for a second?"

Masanobu quickly turned his face away and tried to hide the fact that he was collecting himself. But before he could, Shohei grabbed his chin with his right hand and forced him to face him.

"Idiot."

Staring at Masanobu's cheeks as the tears rolled down, Shohei cursed Masanobu, making him color slightly in surprise.

"So what if I see you like this? It doesn't mean anything."

"I didn't...want you to see it."

"Well, I don't really care."

Shohei gently removed his fingers from Masanobu's chin and drew him into a hug with a sigh.

He's so rough, Masanobu thought with a rueful smile amid the tears. He decided to allow himself to be pitied just this once.

There was an air mail envelope waiting for Wataru when he got home. He knew what it was without even checking the address: it was from Yuichi. It was the

letter he said he'd sent.

Getting it now, after what I just went through...
Wataru thought.

He had just severed his ties with Masanobu completely, but fate was already moving onward. *There's not even time to indulge in sentimentality,* he thought with a sigh, and he wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his hand.

"He said he wrote down...why he postponed coming back."

Wataru was scared to read the letter, but before he could hesitate, his hand had torn open the envelope on its own. He reined in his rushing feelings and, as he was about to take the letter out, something fell onto the ground.

"Wh—"

Wataru started to pick it up reflexively and he was astonished to see that it was a silver ring. At the same moment, he realized that Masanobu still had his ring.

"But then...this must be—"

He stretched his fingers out to it unconsciously, and they trembled in an unfamiliar way. He was sure he was having a bad dream, or that this was someone's idea of a cruel prank. Though he prayed for it to be either of these things, there was no mistaking that the ring he picked up belonged to Yuichi.

"Kazuki...why did you—?"

As he stood frozen in the doorway, Wataru could no longer think. He felt the letter he had not yet looked at and Masanobu's kisses and everything else receding far into the distance.

Afterword

Hello, this is Kannagi. A big thank you for reading this far, to everyone who was eagerly awaiting this volume, and to everyone who picked it up by chance. The fourth volume of the "Only the Ring Finger Knows" series makes its long-awaited debut. Though Wataru is still a high school student studying for his exams, we've finally begun to see his future path. His life has become unusually tumultuous—especially with the introduction of the rumored "unflappable antagonist," Asaka's little brother.

Those of you reading this time may be wondering, "Ms. Kannagi, do you actually worship Asaka?!" But I swear I don't! Rather, it's only because of Kazuki and Wataru's love that the character of Asaka was developed in the first place. He is also trying to learn something from his absolutely unrequited love.

Due to certain circumstances (if you don't know, read the book!) Kazuki's part is incredibly small, and that might make some of you feel a bit sad. If you're one of them, I'll just tell you now, you have to wait for the next book! I plan to deliver Prince Kazuki's revenge and an extra special helping of romance.

And I have one important announcement to make. This series that we've brought to you the past six years will end with the fifth volume. I was shocked to have it become a series and I've become extremely fond of it, but relatively early on my editor and I got together and

decided on a goal of five books in all. Each time I received someone's support or good wishes saying "please keep doing this forever," my heart was honestly moved, but I managed to complete each volume and I decided that the story of Kazuki and Wataru's deepening love would be better if it ended when they find a single "shape," rather than dragging it out forever. I hope you'll watch the two of them, with the affection and bond they've cultivated stronger than ever before, in the last volume. So I sincerely entreat you to stick with them to the very end. I'll try my best to get the next volume to you as quickly as I can!

To the illustrator, Ms. Hotaru Odagiri: thank you for everything in the middle of your busy schedule. I felt nothing but uninterrupted sighs of joy at your beautiful pictures again. Just looking at your subtle drawings, I feel like I can see the words and feelings Kazuki, Wataru, and all the others are hiding. I'm sure the readers feel the same way. We're finally doing the last one next time, so I hope you'll be able to join us again.

It's been a while, so I feel like there were a lot of things I wanted to tell you, but now I'm just waiting, heart pounding, to hear your opinions and feelings about this book. A truly great number of people have supported our boys' love (and the number of letters I get in English has gone up a lot, I guess because the translation came out), and I'm thinking of a "shape" that I want to make that Yuichi and Wataru can be happy with, so I'll be waiting eagerly, from the bottom of my heart, for the day we meet again in the last volume.

www.s-kannagi.net/

—Satoru Kannagi

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FROM



"Thank you for coming, Kazuki."

"Wataru—"

"I wish I could make you understand how happy I am. But we have to leave this sort of thing for the future. Otherwise it'll be too distracting."

With Wataru's leaping heart clear on his face, his speech was thoroughly unconvincing. Wataru locked it away inside his heart and gazed up at Yuichi's face as he fought back a smile.

College entrance exams are looming, and Wataru is running out of time to study. Pushing himself every night, he finds he's losing time with his lover, Yuichi. Their stolen moments together hardly seem to be enough, even though their rings will always connect them. Will they have time for their love to grow together, or will they just grow apart?

Enter a mysterious Christmas card from Yuichi's old female friend that leaves Wataru in fits of jealousy and confusion. But what's all this about a passport? Just when Wataru needs him most, Yuichi is jetting off to New York to tend to an old girlfriend, leaving Wataru in the hands of his wicked older brother Shohei, and his rival in love, Asaka Masanobu, who will never give up his love for Wataru's gentle heart. The two are still set on tearing Wataru and Yuichi apart, each for their own ends. Wataru is attacked from every side, forced to doubt his feelings for the man he loves.

It seems like the only one who wants Wataru and Yuichi together is Asaka's aggressive younger brother Masa'aki who has a brother complex. But it seems like he's out for Wataru's blood, too! With Yuichi thousands of miles away and unable to protect him, what will Wataru do in the latest installment of *Only the Ring Finger Knows*?

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